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**THE MASTERWORKS LABORATORY THEATRE: A HISTORICAL AND
CRITICAL STUDY**

City University of New York

Ph.D. 1982

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THE MASTERWORKS LABORATORY THEATRE:
A HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL STUDY

by

DAVID SIGEL

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate
Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University
of New York

1982

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

THE MASTERWORKS LABORATORY THEATRE:
A HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL STUDY

by

David Sigel

Adviser: Professor Albert Bermel

The Masterworks Laboratory Theatre is a producing organization and workshop under the artistic direction of Walt Witcover. It is dedicated to the belief that classic (non-contemporary) plays and opera can be rehearsed and produced using the principles of the Stanislavski "method." The work of Witcover and his group was hardly new, for the tradition beginning with Stanislavski had continued in Europe throughout this century due to the work of men like Walter Felsenstein and Wieland Wagner. In the United States, Robert Lewis approached musical theatre using the same theories and methods and directors like Elia Kazan, Lee Strasberg, and Gene Frankel applied these rehearsal techniques to productions of classic or non-contemporary drama. As there was no sustained effort in this area, however, Walt Witcover and the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre was established to fill the void. For over a decade, it has been the only organization in the United

States which has attempted to foster and continue the Stanislavski tradition while producing classic theatre and opera.

This dissertation attempts to establish the need for this kind of approach in a brief survey of the theatre in the United States in the sixties. Other attempts to revitalize the classic theatre and opera in the United States were often worthwhile, but they were not in the Stanislavski tradition. A history of the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre from its inception to the present is included, as well as the rehearsal procedures for selected productions. Whenever possible, reviews of the production are included to better give the reader a sense of the results. The writer of this dissertation has relied on personal interviews, production notes, and prompt books to reconstruct as much as possible the fourteen-year history of the organization, and attempts to analyze whether or not the philosophy of the organization can lead to viable theatrical productions in the contemporary American Theatre. While the organization has had some influence on other theatre practitioners, it never received wide recognition or acclaim. The reasons that Witcover and his followers did not alter American theatre nor change American audiences, as well as the positive achievements of the group, are discussed.

FOREWORD
A DREAM OF THEATRE

A DREAM OF THEATRE

I have my own dream of what live theatre should be. I started going to the theatre with my mother when I was five years old, and have continued to go for the past forty years.

The first time I was truly carried away in the theatre was during a production of A Passage To India by E.M. Forster, adapted by Santha Rama Rau. During a long monologue which occurred in a courtroom, Gladys Cooper, a witness, moved me so profoundly that at that moment, I decided I, too, wanted to be an actor. I really don't know how Gladys Cooper worked or what school of acting she subscribed to; all I know is that she really "lived" on the stage.

Yet, most often, I have not been moved, entertained, or impressed in the theatre. I keep going because I still hope that one day I will be.

I became an actor as a teenager and studied with Lloyd Richards, Harold Clurman, Uta Hagen, and Morris Carnovsky, all of whom were disciples of Constantin Stanislavski. They had been subject also to other influences, as I have been in my work, but the essential goal of all these teachers was to help directors and actors turn

written drama into the illusion of real life on the stage; they avoided accepted clichéd notions or theatrical conventions which merely represented the real thing.

All directors and actors hope to create this illusion on the stage but many deny the need for a physical life which evolves from deep exploration of the text. They often present form with little content.

I always wanted to see real people on the stage because I was sure I was like everybody else; that I got angry, sad, giddy, mean, nasty, wanted at times to kill, make love, go to the bathroom, etc. Harold Clurman and Uta Hagen taught me that throughout history the drives and emotions of people were always the same. When I read Plutarch I felt the difference between his people and the people of my age had to do with time and place and not their basic humanity.

As I learned more about the great plays that have survived I really wanted to see them performed so that the characters emerged as flesh and blood. How marvelous it would be to see a play and reach back a century or two and know that people, despite widely differing conditions, were always the same, and probably always will be.

Of course the theatre is not real life but a series of theatrical praxes, however, I would like to see directors and actors get as close as possible to the human experience in all its variations when they present it in the theatre.

It is evident that the Stanislavski approach is not the only way to achieve this goal. I have been moved by the work of Jean-Louis Barrault, Laurence Olivier, and Tyrone Guthrie who do not really follow Stanislavski. However, the work of the Group Theatre, the Actors Studio, and other practitioners of the "method" brought new vitality to contemporary American drama. Some even made attempts to apply these principles to non-contemporary drama. The results were refreshing. As there was no sustained and organized attempt by those using the "method" to approach the classics, or non-contemporary plays, it fell to one of Lee Strasberg's students, Walt Witcover, to continue this work. Witcover did not always succeed in his productions of classic plays and operas, but his effort to bring the "method" to these masterworks still continues. Along the way, he has influenced and stimulated many other actors and directors. The reasons that Witcover and his followers did not alter American theatre nor change American audiences will be evident as I develop this dissertation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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PART I

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The Masterworks Laboratory Theatre* is a group of actors, singers, and directors most of whom are students of Walt Witcover who come and go at will. They perform in the commercial theatre and return to the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre when they are at liberty. The sustaining force of the group is Witcover and his firm belief that classic plays and opera can be rehearsed and produced using the principles of the Stanislavski "method" in the tradition of the Group Theatre and the Actors Studio. The institution is both a producing organization and a workshop.

I hope to show the accomplishments of this group and its failures in an attempt to explore how far a "method" approach to the classics and opera is useful. This dissertation will also try to define and clarify the "process" that takes place during the rehearsal period. Working on material the way Witcover and his group have done is time-consuming and hardly feasible in the commercial theatre with its monetary considerations and deadlines. The rigid conditions of the industry called theatre in this country

* The Masterworks Laboratory Theatre was originally known as Masterworks Theatre Laboratory, Inc.

often limit artistic achievement. The work of Witcover was hardly new, for the tradition beginning with Stanislavski of dealing with the classics in this way continued, both in Europe and the United States. Disciples of Stanislavski like Robert Lewis produced musical theatre in the United States. Walter Felsenstein and Wieland Wagner also tried to apply these theories to opera in Germany.

Some terms will be used frequently in this dissertation. To better understand my usage of them, some definitions are in order.

The "method": After examining the work of actors for many years, Stanislavski set forth some basic principles for actors and directors in the exercise of their craft. This led to a system that concentrated on psychological realism and emphasized both inner and outer truth. He advocated exploration and training of the inner being of the actor which applies to the art of the actor in almost all circumstances. Relaxation, observation, concentration, sense memory, emotional recall, substitution, and improvisation are all exercises which help the actor prepare for his task, the representation or impersonation of a given character. This approach helps to sensitize the actor to the main lines of action in the text, deal with the given circumstances (time, place, relationships) of a piece and give him a definite plan to help him create actions and build characters that are specific and suitable

to the needs of the production. These exercises help the actor to use his personal resources, to fire his imagination, to put psychological action under his control, and to allow for its expression in space. The "method" has been further developed in the United States by directors and teachers like Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Harold Clurman, Robert Lewis, and Uta Hagen, each creating his own personal variation on the "method."

"Process": This word will be used often. It refers to the course or method of operations, including trial and error and improvisation during a rehearsal period, and a study of it should clarify the results achieved by Masterworks Laboratory Theatre.

"Classic": Walt Witcover uses the word when referring to non-contemporary plays. He means plays that have lived for many years and make up the historical library of dramatic literature. These plays still have interest for an audience because of their poetic content, structure, philosophical statement or simple humanity. Plays of Shakespeare and Molière have been accepted as classics by everyone, but Witcover also includes works by writers like Chekhov and O'Neill in his definition of the term.

Walt Witcover and his group continue to explore the working methods of the Group Theatre and its disciples. Launched in 1931 by Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman, and

Cheryl Crawford, the Group Theatre tried to emulate the methods and ensemble approach of the Moscow Art Theatre. The company, including Stella Adler, Morris Carnovsky, and Elia Kazan, presented only plays by American writers like Paul Green, Maxwell Anderson, Sidney Kingsley, Irwin Shaw, William Saroyan, and Clifford Odets. In 1941, the group was disbanded but through the work of its original members and their students, Stanislavski's system grew new, indigenous roots in America.

Later Lee Strasberg and other members of the Group Theatre founded the Actors Studio which continues this tradition. At first, it did not produce plays as the Group Theatre did, but served as a school for training actors to practice the "method" derived from Stanislavski's system. Later, the studio did stage several plays for public consumption: The Three Sisters, Baby Want A Kiss, Strange Interlude, Winter Journey, and others.

While the work of Stanislavski has been familiar for decades, it has sometimes been thought to apply only to naturalistic or realistic drama. Yet Stanislavski did symbolist and other non-realistic plays. His acting and directing depended on specificity and lent themselves to the work of realistic writers of the twentieth century. Yet he recognized that the work of many writers was far more complex, containing dreams, images, and symbolic visions that had to be depicted on the stage. As he grew more mature in his art, his search continued for a means

of dealing theatrically with this complex material.

It was Yevgeny Vakhtangov who, while stylistically preserving Stanislavski's directing techniques, hoped to transcend naturalism without abolishing it, thereby effectively communicating difficult imagery to his audiences. Vakhtangov struggled for an artistic eclecticism and his work gave new plausibility to "mixed" styles. He also adapted playwrights' texts, often updating them, while remaining faithful to their inner content. As a disciple of Stanislavski, Vakhtangov believed that an actor was able to convey his personal feelings and those of the character he was portraying at the same time. Vakhtangov, as we will see, has greatly affected Witcover, as did Antonin Artaud who questioned the relevance of past literature as a foundation for theatrical presentation in his generation. Artaud consequently claimed the right, not only to transform, transpose, or rewrite old masterpieces, but also to not do them when he chose. Masterworks Laboratory Theatre does something similar in that it abandons the traditional way of presenting a play while trying to remain faithful to the intent of the text.

Masterworks Laboratory Theatre was formed in the late sixties. People from various branches of theatre and opera, with dissimilar backgrounds but similar ideals, and with knowledge of the newest trends in theatre and opera elsewhere in the world, work with the group. The analysis

of the work of Witcover and the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre that follows draws on personal interviews to describe the work "process," and critical reviews of the results. In order to clarify the uniqueness of this organization, I will begin with a brief look at the state of classic theatre and opera in America in the sixties and the work of other theatre practitioners and organizations with this kind of material.

PART II

THE NEED FOR MASTERWORKS LABORATORY THEATRE
AND ITS ORIGINS

CHAPTER I
THE CLASSICS IN AMERICA IN THE SIXTIES

Think of all the classical plays that have been almost buried for contemporary audiences by bad traditional acting. Why should every lady-in-waiting move like a ballet dancer? Why should every spear-carrier stand as rigid as cardboard? Why should the king and queen intone like bad opera singers without music? Where are the real human beings in these plays? They are lost behind ready-made, false forms.¹

These are the words of Uta Hagen, an actress and teacher. She is calling for a new approach to the classics. Since she is an exponent of the "method," she naturally feels that it is the path to the revitalization of the classics.

For Peter Brook, the goals are similar. His techniques are more eclectic. In his book, The Empty Space, he writes:

The condition of the Deadly Theatre is fairly obvious. All through the world theatre audiences are dwindling. There are occasional new movements, good new writers, and so on, but as a whole, the theatre not only fails to elevate or instruct, it hardly entertains . . .
. . . The Deadly Theatre finds its deadly way into grand opera and tragedy, into the plays of

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1. Uta Hagen, Respect for Acting, written with Haskel Frankel (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1973), p. 23.

Molière and the plays of Brecht. Of course nowhere does the Deadly Theatre install itself so securely, so comfortably and so slyly as in the works of William Shakespeare.²

Brook goes on to say that the Deadly Theatre takes easily to Shakespeare because we see his plays done by good actors in what seems like the proper way. The productions are lively and colorful, there is music and everyone is dressed up, just as they are supposed to be in the best of classical theatres. Yet, secretly, the audience finds the plays excruciatingly boring and either blames Shakespeare, or theatre as such, or even themselves.

The 1964 production of Doctor Faustus by Christopher Marlowe, directed by Word Baker at the Phoenix Theatre in New York City showed great imagination. It was a colorful production with talented actors that was at once startling and theatrical with effective performances by James Ray and David Margulies. Baker created a spectacle with brilliant production effects (sets, costumes, banners, and an ingenious movable ladder) which tended to neglect the deep meaning of the text. It was a deliberate choice and was viewed differently by the critics.

Martin Gottfried wrote:

. . . Style, perhaps if there had been just a little of it, the philosophical emptiness of the Baker production might have been overlooked . . .
 . . . Without philosophical staging, "Faustus"

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2. Peter Brook, The Empty Space (New York: Discus/Avon Books, 1968), pp. 9 and 10.

is foolish. Without acting style it is un-theatrical. Without good performances, it is irritating. Without substantial direction it is confused. The Phoenix Theatre production is without them all and can well be done without.³

And Howard Taubman, while finding some faults, was at least grateful that Baker had attempted the play:

. . . Stressing the work's glitter, pageantry and grotesquerie, he has proceeded as if he wanted to be sure that no device to score a sure-fire theatrical point would be missed.

This approach has been maintained with consistency. But it is an open question whether Marlowe's biting naiveté should be presented with an elaborate innocence that smacks almost of patronizing. One also wonders whether the production's overlay of music and dancing does not blunt the play's urgency and passion.

. . . Despite one's reservations about this "Doctor Faustus," it has a consistency of its own. The pertinence for contemporary man in Marlowe's furious vision comes through. Who else is doing Marlowe in New York in this anniversary year?⁴

The same year, John Gielgud presented Hamlet in New York with Richard Burton in the title role. Of this Harold Clurman wrote:

I walked out on John Gielgud's production of Hamlet. I had followed it attentively for three hours and I could no more. Not that this was the worst Hamlet I had ever seen--far from it-- but after witnessing countless productions of the play, I could not take another which, apart from commercial considerations, had so little purpose or reason for being.

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3. Martin Gottfried, Theatre: "Doctor Faustus," Women's Wear Daily, October 6, 1964, p. 48.
 4. Howard Taubman, The Theatre: "Marlowe's 'Doctor Faustus'," The New York Times, October 6, 1964, p. 34.

. . . It is not a "bad" Hamlet, but rather no Hamlet at all.⁵

Not all attempts at the classics in the 60s were unsuccessful. William Ball, Ellis Rabb, and Tyrone Guthrie, none of them disciples of Stanislavski, produced exciting productions of classic plays.

I will cite Harold Clurman's review of Guthrie's production of Hamlet performed by the Minnesota Theatre Company in 1963 for several reasons: (1) It is another Hamlet, (2) the reviewer is the same, and (3) Walt Witcover states that he has been greatly influenced by Guthrie. Clurman found fault with some facets of this production, but stayed, nonetheless, to the end. He wrote:

Guthrie's Hamlet is a production in which the actors--some of them do very well in serving his view of scenes and characters--are employed to fulfill a design rather than to embody their own (or whatever may be taken to be Shakespeare's) substance . . .

I followed this four-hour (uncut) version of the play with almost unremitting attention, for Guthrie never does anything that is altogether without originality . . .

. . . There are several such episodes which, in addition to their exciting choreography or staging . . . make this production a far more stimulating event than most of the more critically applauded presentations of Hamlet seen in New York since John Barrymore's day.⁶

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5. Harold Clurman, "An Odd Hamlet, 1964," The Naked Image (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1967), pp. 274 and 276.
 6. Ibid. "The Minnesota Theatre Company, 1963," pp. 137-138.

In his book, In Various Directions, Guthrie described the state of classic theatre in America.

In the United States, no recognizably American style of classical productions has yet emerged . . .

The American Theatre has to its credit many true achievements in the field of modern bourgeois and proletarian drama; it excels in the production of light sentimental song-and-dance shows. It will not, in my opinion, make much of a showing in classical drama until American education is less obsessed with training people to be economically successful and until more attention is paid to language, literature and philosophy.⁷

The need for a new dynamic approach to classic material had already been recognized by many in America, among them theatre practitioners who had been influenced by Stanislavski, the Group Theatre, and the Actors Studio. The celebrated Group Theatre had applied the principles of the "method" to contemporary American plays with social relevance. Directors such as Elia Kazan and Robert Lewis who had staged the works of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, William Inge, and other American playwrights believed that the "method" could also apply to classic material.

In 1957, Gene Frankel directed Ben Jonson's Volpone adapted by Stefan Zweig. Alfred Ryder played Mosca and Howard da Silva was Volpone. Both were members of the Actors Studio. The reviews were favorable.

7. Tyrone Guthrie, In Various Directions (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1965), p. 65.

Louis Calta wrote in The New York Times:

. . . Although "Volpone" is centuries old, its sallies at hypocrisy and sham are just as applicable today and just as diverting as they ever were. The rogues, the legacy hunters, the scamps, the lust for wealth and the villainy are as contemporaneous as today's hucksters' row.

. . . Gene Frankel, co-producer of the farce, also has performed a deft job of direction. He has seen to it that there is no overstress or classical heaviness about the production . . . Altogether, the present downtown revival of the farce is a novel and enjoyable theatre venture.⁸

Elia Kazan's direction of The Changeling at the ANTA Washington Square Theatre in 1964, however, was not well received. Richard Watts entitled his review, "Confusion in a Classic Drama."⁹ Walter Kerr also reviewed it. His opening critical sally was, "The Lincoln Center Repertory Theater's production of 'The Changeling' is deeply embarrassing . . ."¹⁰ And John McClain's review of the play by Thomas Middleton and William Rowley was titled "Revival Hardly Classic, A Sorry Start of Season."¹¹

Earlier in the same year, however, the Actors Studio produced Chekhov's The Three Sisters at the Morosco

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8. Louis Calta, Theatre: "Jonson's Elizabethan Prank," The New York Times, January 8, 1957, p. 27.
 9. Richard Watts, "Confusion in a Classic Drama," The New York Post, October 30, 1964, p. 66.
 10. Walter Kerr, "The Changeling," The New York Herald Tribune, October 30, 1964, p. 90.
 11. John McClain, "Revival Hardly Classic, A Sorry Start of Season," The New York Journal American, October 30, 1964, p. 24.

Theatre, directed by Lee Strasberg. The reviews were mostly positive. One can argue that this was not a classic play, but by Witcover's definition, The Three Sisters is classic; and the Actors Studio production is an example of Americans using the "method" as it had evolved in the mid-twentieth century doing this kind of material.

From Jerry Tallmer:

The Actors Studio talks a good deal about the truth. Last night at the Morosco Theater, it nailed [down] for our lifetime the right to do so . . .

The Actors Studio also talks a good deal about inner life. I do not think I have ever seen 16 or however many actors walking a stage with more valid and interrelated inner lives than those Mr. Strasberg has elicited from his brilliant cast for Chekhov's "The Three Sisters" at the Morosco.

It stings through every inch of every scene. . .12

Despite these few attempts to revitalize the classics, these plays revived in New York and in regional theatres in the U.S.A., while lively and colorful in many ways, were often a repetition of what others had done before. The directors believed that they had some special understanding of the "style" of these classics, an erroneous notion based on reconstruction of the so-called "style" through books and paintings of the past. Rehearsal

12. Jerry Tallmer, "Across the Footlights: Truth, Chekhov, Strasberg," The New York Post, June 23, 1964, p. 16.

techniques came from preconceived ideas of acting, including vocal presentation of the text.

Lines were spoken as if "projection" of the text had been the most important goal. An accepted pattern of declamation, often loud and bombastic, had grown up over the centuries. If actors ever spoke like this it was because once they had played out of doors; but the need for declaiming has long since passed. "Meaning" in the production of the classics in the sixties continued to consist only of the ideas expressed in the text. Directors emphasized the lines they believed to embody the author's philosophical viewpoint; the message of the play. They capitulated to the texts which were considered definitive and sacred, the essence of a theatrical experience.

But:

A word does not start as a word, it is an end product which begins as an impulse, stimulated by attitude and behavior which dictate the need for expression.¹³

In the final analysis, "meaning" is the sum total of the theatre experience, the emotional and sensory data as well as the intellectual content. To achieve this totality, a director must bring all the parts together, to enlighten, move, and entertain the audience. As the theatre is an artistic event, it must have a unity that is

13. Peter Brook, The Empty Space, p. 12.

not encountered in real life, for a great deal of data is presented to an audience in a limited time. Therefore, a language must be found that is a synthesis of gesture and thought, and speaks in space. Only then may gesture, speech, and decor function organically. Any attempt to reduce the "meaning" of a play to a formula, a preconceived idea, limited to noisily enunciated words, undercuts the effects of the play. Again, in the words of Peter Brook:

The only way to find the true path to the speaking of a word is through the process that parallels the original creative one.¹⁴

14. Ibid.

CHAPTER II
ATTEMPTS TO REVITALIZE THE THEATRE

For over three decades, Brook has devoted his energies to the overthrow of what he called, "the Deadly Theatre." Also fascinated by the classics, he has had a great influence on the American theatre as well as the British theatre.

Born in 1925, he began directing in his teens; at 21 he directed at Stratford. In the late 1940s, he became Director of Productions at Covent Garden where he created a sensation with his production of Salome, designed by Salvador Dali. Throughout the 1950s, he continued to produce innovative work while achieving success on Broadway and the West End. While directing Genet's The Balcony in Paris in 1956, he developed an interest in Artaud and the Theatre of Cruelty. His work with the Royal Shakespeare Company at the LAMBDA Experimental Theatre in 1963 and later his production of Peter Weiss's The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade in 1964 reflected this interest.

Basically, he deals with two distinct kinds of

theatre: the verbal theatre which he mastered so well early in his career, and the non-verbal theatre with which he continues to experiment. Brook published The Empty Space in 1968 in which he defined his theatrical ideas. Theatre, for Brook, falls into four classes: (1) the Deadly Theatre, (2) the Holy Theatre, (3) the Rough Theatre, and (4) the Immediate Theatre. The Deadly Theatre is bad theatre, from light comedy to tragedy and grand opera--a theatre where all the joy and true entertainment is lacking, where tradition kills inspiration and mediocrity is the order of the day. The Holy Theatre comes from a nostalgia for the glories of the past; the attempt to recreate them and the need that humanity has for some kind of ritualistic experience. The Rough Theatre, which is the theatre that is nearest to people, is found in a village square or hospital ward; it is a puppet show, a troupe of the commedia dell'arte or a circus. A popular theatre of and for the people, its goal is direct communication with them. The Immediate Theatre is a very special one which involves the performer and spectator alike in an integral experience; where both are necessary parts and must interact spiritually.

Brook applies his theories to specific productions in The Empty Space. His book is stimulating from the first statement, "I can take any empty space and call it

a bare stage,"¹ to the end, where he seems influenced by Stanislavski's "magic if."

In everyday life, "if" is a fiction. In the theatre, "if" is an experiment. In everyday life, "if" is an evasion, in the theatre, "if" is the truth. When we are persuaded to believe in this truth, then the theatre and life are one. This is a high aim. It sounds like hard work. To play needs much work. But when we experience the work as play, then it is not work anymore. A play is play.²

In 1968, Jean-Louis Barrault invited Brook to conduct experimental sessions with performers from all over the world at the Théâtre des Nations in Paris, which were interrupted by the political events of May, 1968. However, Brook continued his experimentation and one result was his production of The Tempest at the Roundhouse in London in late 1968. The physical production was unusual in that the audience was seated on three sides of a central open space on which were erected scaffolding and platforms of various heights with pipes and ladders. Only selected scenes of the text were used, the action of the piece elaborated and improvised. Shakespeare's lines were primarily for rhythmical effect; non-verbal sound and mime predominated. In the opening shipwreck scene,

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1. Peter Brook, The Empty Space (New York: Discus/Avon Books, 1968), p. 9.
 2. Ibid., p. 128.

the actors formed the ship. Brook had been influenced by Joseph Chaikin who was present at the sessions in Paris (1968) and earlier had collaborated with Brook for the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of U.S. in London in 1966.

Another revolutionary production was Brook's A Midsummer Night's Dream, first performed at Stratford in 1970.

The following is a description:

The stage was enclosed on three sides by white, unadorned walls broken by two nearly invisible doors at the rear. At the downstage corners, fire ladders ran up to a visible catwalk on which musicians in modern dress were placed and on which actors appeared frequently. The forest was suggested by loosely coiled metal springs attached to fishing rods. Trapezes lowered and raised to varying heights within the setting served as perches for actors. The performers wore a kind of coverall or "mod boutique" clothing, varied by a sprinkling of Commedia dell'arte and circus costumes.³

Many acting devices, as well as the setting and costumes were reminiscent of Meyerhold's experiments with Bio-mechanics and constructivism, influences readily admitted by Brook. The play was interpreted as an exploration of love in which the fantasy sequences became

3. Oscar G. Brockett and Robert Findley, Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since 1870 (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 686-687.

a series of dreamlike illustrations. The whole production was redolent with a spirit of freedom and exhilaration.

Margaret Croyden in Lunatics, Lovers and Poets described the production as

. . . stunning and unorthodox.
 . . . Although it was staged in a proscenium theatre and Brook used traditionally trained actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company, he turned the play into a brilliant avant-garde production.
 . . . His new production was a deliberate departure from convention--contemporary in design, Freudian in tone, and at the same time, faithful to the Shakespearian text.⁴

In 1971, the International Center for Theatre Research was formed in Paris with Peter Brook as director. The French Ministry for Cultural Affairs made available to the organization a hall in Les Gobelins, which was originally intended for the showing of tapes-tries. The Center was an outgrowth of the work Brook had started in 1968. It has been financed by American and Portuguese foundations and the government of Iran (under the Shah). The group has performers from all over the world, about two dozen, and has appeared in Europe, Iran, Africa, and the United States, where it performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and elsewhere in 1973 and 1980.

4. Margaret Croyden, Lunatics, Lovers and Poets: The Contemporary Experimental Theatre (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), p. 251.

Brook has explored both the old and the new in the theatre, always searching for a synthesis. In the body of his work, he has seemed to develop an eclectic style using many available contemporary ideas and techniques.

The Living Theatre

One seed for revitalization of the classics had been implanted years earlier by the Living Theatre, a group that did not concentrate on the classics, but had a great influence on many theatrical directors who later did, including Witcover. In 1948, Judith Malina and Julian Beck tried to mount a theatre in a basement on Wooster Street, and chose the name, the Living Theatre. The basement theatre never opened, but the Becks presented Paul Goodman's Doctor Faustus Lights The Lights at the Off-Broadway Cherry Lane Theatre in 1951. They remained at this house in Greenwich Village until the summer of 1952 when they moved to a loft at Broadway and 100th Street where they produced their first show in March, 1954 and they continued there until the end of 1955. In early 1959, they started to produce plays in their own loft theatre on 14th Street at Sixth Avenue. Commercial success came with Jack Gelber's The Connection which opened May 15, 1963.

The loft theatre closed in October, 1963. Pierre Biner tells the story of the group in his book, The Living Theatre. Forced into exile, the group continued to function in Europe and, later, in South America. In 1968, the Living Theatre was invited back to this country by Robert Brustein, at the time Dean of the Yale Drama School. After a nationwide tour, they returned to Europe. They had threatened, provoked, and irritated liberals and radicals, as well as traditionalists; some critics were belligerent, others friendly and supportive. The reasons for the difficulties that the group faced were complex but their influence on the non-commercial theatre in the United States and Europe was great. Perhaps the following statement by Martin Gottfried will shed some light on their problems:

The Becks' artistic and intellectual commitment has in a sense caused their own exile, since by giving into right-wing pressures (both theatrical and political) they could have continued to function in New York. But they are extreme left-wingers in all things and the artist who creates in wild unconventionality will not turn around and conform in non-artistic matters.
 . . . the Living Theatre, though abroad, remains one of the most significant, if not the most significant American theatre development at present.⁵

The material the Living Theatre performed was unique; often an outgrowth of the rehearsal techniques

5. Martin Gottfried, A Theater Divided: The Postwar American Stage (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1967), p. 299.

of the group. In the theatre's evolution from the days of The Brig and The Connection, the text became much less important; merely one element in the total creative theatrical event.

On February 18, 1967 at the Stadttheater, Krefeld, West Germany, the group presented Antigone, the closest they came to presenting a classic. This production was based on Brecht's Antigone. Brecht had based his play on Hölderlin's translation which followed Sophocles. Judith Malina began working on an English translation in 1961. In her version where Brecht clung to Hölderlin, she followed word by word. She also strove to retain the meter of Brecht's German in the translation. The Living Theatre distributed this text among a number of actors who recited it in the language of the audience, in the clearest and most didactic manner they could achieve. Wherever the company performed, the stage represented Thebes and the auditorium Argos, and when the action of the play moved to Argos, the house lights went on. There were no props at all, e.g., a seat for Tiresias was a kneeling actor; a battering ram, two actors who lifted a third. The lighting was intense and constant throughout the play while the sound effects were produced entirely by the actors' voices and bodies. While in the Brecht version many events of the play were not enacted but merely reported, the Living Theatre mimed all, including the most obscure passages of the chorus. The actors became pliable, plastic.

The interpretation of the material was also unusual. The Living Theatre declined to accuse or judge Kreon, or even to spread the guilt so as to cover all the characters equally; instead, it suggested varying degrees of guilt. The responsibility of each individual was dramatized. From the moment the prologue began while the audience was filing in and settling in their seats, they were confronted by the actors as Thebans dealing with Argives. At the end of the play, when Thebes is helpless, the troupe repeated the device of the opening scene. Now Thebes was defeated by Argos--that is, by the audience. As the Argives prepared the extermination of Thebes, the actors assembled in a row at the edge of the stage, awaiting the closing line of the chorus, and when the audience began to applaud, the actors became terrified of their fate. They confronted the spectators who were about to escape the nightmare and return to their normal states. But the troupe compelled them once more to face a horrible reality, as the actors retreated in dreadful terror to the back of the stage as if pursued by assassins--that is, the audience.⁶ The Living Theatre captured audiences and stimulated a new vitality in non-commercial American theatre.

6. Pierre Biner, The Living Theatre, translated by Robert Meister (New York: Discus/Avon Books, 1972), pp. 145-158.

Joseph Papp and The New York Shakespeare Festival

Joseph Papp, who began his work in the 1950s with the New York Shakespeare Festival has had considerable influence on the American theatre in the past few years. He has created one of the conduits through which some avant-garde or experimental theatre has passed into the mainstream of the commercial theatre in this country.

Eventually, the municipality of New York aided Papp and in 1962, the Delacorte Theatre, an outdoor amphitheatre seating 2,236 people, was built in Central Park, providing subsidized free Shakespeare for New Yorkers. By 1964, Papp was touring in different neighborhoods in the boroughs of the city attracting new audiences to the theatre.

In 1967, Papp transformed the Astor Library on Lafayette Street into the Public Theatre. Shows ranging from Hair, staged originally by Gerald Freedman and for Broadway by Tom O'Horgan, to Chorus Line were given a birthplace. Not only has Papp attracted new audiences to the theatre, he has also encouraged minority playwrights in this country by giving them a home. He has made much radical "new" theatre respectable. Although he has had his defeats, like the Lincoln Center operation, the Public Theatre is still thriving and many productions starting there have reached Broadway and a mass audience.

Papp has not created a group or school which ex-

plores new acting styles. His Shakespearian productions, however, like his Puerto Rican Hamlet, with a rewritten text, were departures from tradition.

Other Groups and Directors

Some other groups were the Association of Producing Artists, led by Ellis Rabb, the Circle in the Square, and the Vivian Beaumont Theatre; all of whom presented the classics. Except for Pantagleize, co-directed by Rabb and John Houseman, these productions, in the tradition of the Broadway commercial theatre, did not reveal many unusual approaches.

The Chelsea Theatre Center: under the direction of Robert Kalfin, also emerged in the mid-sixties. For some years, it had a home at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Initially, it presented a rather avant-garde program which included the American premiere of Genet's The Screens, Witkiewicz's The Water Hen, Bond's Saved, and Jones's The Slave Ship. Later alternating between new works and classics, it brought to American attention the current trends in European theatre as well as new productions of Candide and The Beggar's Opera. Candide was moved to Broadway in co-production with Harold Prince. The Chelsea Theatre Center later leased a two-story building on West 43rd Street. It was, in reality, a production organization and its impact on the current theatre lies

in the kinds of plays it brought to American audiences. It expanded the theatrical consciousness of New York, but did not train performers nor follow any particular philosophy of theatrical presentation.

The Performance Group: founded in the fall of 1967 by Richard Schechner who had come to New York from Tulane University, New Orleans, where he had been a professor of theatre and editor of the Tulane Drama Review, a journal which dealt, for the most part, with the contemporary theatre with an emphasis on the avant-garde theatre movement. He immediately started workshops which later evolved into a theatrical company. Greatly influenced by the writings and work of Artaud, the Living Theatre, Grotowski, the Open Theatre, and the makers of "happenings" like Kaprow, Schechner wished to define more clearly for himself and others exactly what "environmental theatre" was, and to establish it as a permanent part of the American theatre. He reasoned that for centuries in Western society the theatre had developed very specific patterns of performance. It had, for the most part, presented plays in which the spectator and the actors were separated. No matter what the so-called style, whether it was Romantic, Naturalistic, or Expressionistic, the performer had usually represented a character which was developed in the text along a linear path. The plays presented in this manner usually had story lines developed clearly and logi-

cally. This was chiefly a result of traditional Western logic which is causal and assumes that human personality, experience, and social structures develop "organically." However, other cultures had recognized other ways and different patterns; systems that included associational and suggestive logic, random development and patterns that were subjectively discovered rather than objectively presented.

Schechner presented six "axioms" that served to define this theatre. (1) The theatrical event is a set of related transactions with "Pure"/"Art" on one end and "Impure"/"Life" on the other. He places environmental theatre in between life and art which is a creation of the mind of man: the traditional theatre at the same end as art and happenings and spontaneous events at the same end as life. (2) In environmental theatre, all the space is used for the performance and the spectator becomes part of the event as a "scene-maker" and "scene-watcher" in much the same way that Grotowski deals with space and the spectator. (3) The theatrical event can take place in a space specifically created for it or in a found space like a cemetery or playground which has been adapted to the needs of the production. (4) Focus is flexible and variable, moving from element to element during the course of the event. (5) Every element of the production has its meaning and force. Properties, set pieces, and performers

speak their own language rather than supporting the words of the text. (6) A text need be neither the starting point nor the goal of a production. There may be no text at all.⁷ The interesting concept here is that the site of a performance is molded into an integral part of a whole which includes the actors and spectators so that all may interact as an entity.

The Performance Group established a theatre in a garage at 33 Wooster Street in 1968. Dionysus in '69 opened on Thursday night, June 9, 1968 in the large re-modeled garage. The spectators sat, stood, or reclined on platforms of various heights scattered around the space, leaving the area largely undefined except for a performance region in the center. The actors were not confined to this area and often mingled with the audience.

Ross Wetzsteon wrote of the spectacle:

The difference between the Living Theatre and the Performance Group seems to be the difference between the exemplary and the exhortative--distinctions which might help illuminate some of the areas of exploration in the avant-garde theatre, in particular, the attitude of environment, audience, text and acting, and the problems of illusion, representation and metaphor . . . like many exponents of the new theatre, with its patronizing mistrust of the conceptual and its naive aspiration to the impulsive.⁸

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7. Richard Schechner, Public Domain (New York: Avon Books, 1969), pp. 167-191.
 8. Ross Wetzsteon, "Theatre: Dionysus in '69," The Village Voice, October 17, 1968, p. 45.

The show won an Obie Award for the 1968-69 season. The Performance Group next presented Makbeth in 1969. Schechner adapted the Shakespearean play. By now, the group was being reviewed by first-string critics like Clive Barnes, who wrote:

The idea, I presume, is to reduce the Shakespeare play to its basic themes, to remove all illustrative poetry, and to put stress on the poetry of Action, the nerves, tendons and muscles of the play's creative force . . . It has guts and daring, it is theatre that looks forward instead of sideways . . . styles vary within the play.⁹

After this production, however, the group had some internal problems. Many of the actors defected, but Schechner continued his work, receiving grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and private foundations. In 1977, the Performance Group was still functioning. In April of that year, it presented Mother Courage by Brecht. Schechner continues to explore new theatrical possibilities on the Off-Off-Broadway level.

The Manhattan Project: formed by André Gregory who was born in Paris in 1934. To escape World War II, his family settled in New York in 1939. He graduated from Harvard in 1956 and for a time was assistant to Jean Dalmryple, and stage-managed at the City Center and the Phoenix Theatre in New York. Later he became a stage

9. Clive Barnes, "Theatre: Makbeth," The New York Times, November 21, 1969, p. 51.

manager and assistant director at the San Francisco Actors Workshop. As an actor, he trained at the Neighborhood Playhouse and became a member of the Actors Studio. In 1958, he served as manager of the American Theatre at the Brussel's World Fair and the next year, he co-produced Deirdre of the Sorrows at the Gate Theatre in New York. In 1960 he spent six months working with the Berliner Ensemble. Gregory co-produced The Blacks of Genet Off-Broadway and in 1964 he became a director at the Living Arts Theatre in Philadelphia. Eventually his production of Rochelle Owens's Belclch offended the board of directors and he was discharged. As the artistic director of the Los Angeles Inner City Repertory Company, he staged Molière's Tartuffe in 1967. He set it in nineteenth century California, interpreting the plot as the climb of a "beautiful, shrewd" black man into middle class society. These innovations led to a controversy which caused his resignation.

After a brief seminar with Grotowski, he was invited to teach acting at New York University in 1968, where he later formed the Manhattan Project with a group of students who had also worked with Grotowski. Their first production was Alice based on the book, Alice in Wonderland.¹⁰

10. Elenore Lester, quoting André Gregory, "Taking a Trip With André and His Alice," The New York Times, Sunday, November 1, 1970, Arts and Leisure Section, p. 3.

Gregory and his troupe used many of the exercises they learned with Grotowski, but also applied principles of the "method" to the work. The following account reveals to some degree the work process:

One reason the group was able to do so much with Alice was, according to Gregory, the time factor. Even regional theatres are trapped by time. You can't experiment. You simply have to put on so many plays a year. But theatre needs time, just like writing. We decided we would take the time we needed with Alice. We worked all day, six days a week. Sometimes, as with the Mad Tea Party, we worked 16 hours at a stretch--we wanted to find out what went on among those men sitting at the table so many hours . . ."11

Gregory went on to say that the group worked so closely together that one no longer knew who was responsible for which idea. At the beginning, the group started working only with the chapters that turned them on, letting it all bubble up from the unconscious. Later they tried to find the line that connected the episodes. The rehearsals were violent; they warmed up with juggling and somersaults and then played games that seemed to throw light on the scenes they were working on. The rehearsals continued for eleven months.

Lester described the production as:

A fresh 1970's version--a grand Total Theatre--Theatre of the Absurd production, which used games to put life and energy into an arid, squalid environment. A new conception of theatre, inspired by Grotowski, which originated around the actor.

11. Ibid.

. . . Using only rudimentary props, the actors, capable of spectacular acrobatics, are able to express such magical things as Alice's sudden size changes, and her endless descent down the rabbit hole.¹²

There was criticism both for and against Alice; again from the same article:

Peering into its depths Time's T. E. Kalem saw the "primordial psycho-genetic source of Man's visceral and abiding need of theatre," and Clive Barnes spotted brilliant and alarming insights into Lewis Carroll's character. Studying the same depths, John Lahr found terrifying truths about the current political scene.¹³

Other reviewers used words like "mythic," "classic," and "genius." Walter Kerr criticized the excessive New Theatre confrontation, concluding that it had reduced a masterpiece to absurdity--an absurdity with a small a. Others found it incoherent and shapeless.

Gregory and the Manhattan Project went on to deal with classic material as well as contemporary plays of the Absurdist school. In January 1975, the group presented Chekhov's The Seagull. The following is from an article by John Gruen which describes some of the innovations of the production:

The audience is asked to move within the playing area as the action of the play moves from outdoors to indoors. There is a conventional setting, but it surrounds the audience as well as the actors.

12. Ibid. Elenore Lester is not quoting André Gregory.

13. Ibid.

Costumes are only vaguely of the period, with blue jeans, sweaters, and brightly colored tights being worn by certain characters.¹⁴

Of these innovations, Gregory said,

The reason for all that is that I wanted to show a confrontation between a contemporary company and a classic writer--between the present and the past--and to try, in some way, to get into the future.¹⁵

The following from a review by Clive Barnes is also very revealing:

The play has been updated into the nineteen thirties or so . . . The actors provide cartoon realizations and images of the leading actors. The acting is naturalistic but mannered--both vocally and physically. It is a company style that is both offbeat and frenetic. Words are eccentrically, and often comically articulated, and gestures are frequently grotesque in their exaggeration. . . . The weakness of this Seagull is largely a lack of cultural resonance, and an avoidance of theatrical tradition. The advantage of all this is the new emphasis it puts on the play, and the intensity of focus Mr. Gregory achieves.¹⁶

Barnes was much more enthusiastic about the group's earlier production of Beckett's Endgame in 1973. He wrote:

It is a lovely production. Even more, it is a loving production . . . and, incidentally, this

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14. John Gruen, "The Avant-Garde Discovers Chekhov," The New York Times, January 5, 1975, Section 2, p. 5.
 15. *Ibid.*, quoting André Gregory.
 16. Clive Barnes, "Theatre: Gregory Stages Chekhovian Seagull," The New York Times, January 9, 1975, p.49.

is one of the best things in the American theatre here and now.¹⁷

Barnes's review indicates perhaps that Gregory's techniques receive accolades when devoted to Absurdist material or at least more contemporary work than classic material that has more traditional associations.

Andrei Serban: born in 1943 in Bucharest, Rumania, where he attended high school, in 1968, he graduated from the Institute of Theatre Art. As a student, he won First Prize at the Zagreb International Students Festival, both in 1965 and 1966 with his productions. In 1970, on invitation from Ellen Stewart, he came to the United States on a Ford Foundation study grant to work at the La Mama Experimental Theatre. His first American production was Arden of Faversham, using the Elizabethan play as an exercise in Theatre of Cruelty based on Artaud. It was seen by Peter Brook and as a result Serban participated in Brook's International Research Institute in Paris and Shiraz, Iran in 1970-71. Upon his return to New York, Serban once again worked at La Mama, directing productions of Medea (1972), Electra (1973), originally produced for Jean-Louis Barrault and the Autumn Festival in Paris, and The Trojan Women (1974). These works became known under the collective title, "Fragments of a Trilogy" which toured

17. Clive Barnes, "Theatre: André Gregory's Endgame," The New York Times, February 8, 1973, p. 39.

internationally over a five-year period. In 1975 he formed the Great Jones Repertory Project under the patronage of Ellen Stewart. The group did not survive, however.¹⁸ In the summer of 1975, Serban directed Brecht's Good Woman of Setzuan at the Berlin International Festival; it also appeared at the Equity Library Theatre. In 1976, his production of As You Like It toured several summer festivals in France. In the spring of 1977, he directed The Cherry Orchard and in the summer of 1977 his production of Agamemnon for the New York Shakespeare Festival opened, first at the Beaumont Theatre and subsequently at the Delacorte Theatre in Central Park. He has directed several times since then for Joseph Papp.

He has taught at the Royal Swedish Academy, Carnegie-Mellon University, Sarah Lawrence College, and at the Paris Conservatoire d'Art Dramatique. In 1978 he was the associate director of the Yale Repertory Theatre and School of Drama.

Serban also worked with Liviu Ciulei. With links to Artaud and indirectly to Grotowski, he builds from movement, myths, and sounds. His emphasis has not been on the psychological exploration of a naturalistic text, but on giving physical expression--quite often removed from naturalism--to the primal forces, the archetypes

18. Richard Eder, "A Fiery Stage Troupe Moving to Paris," The New York Times, March 24, 1976, p. 28.

beneath the motivations. His work with the physical space of a production is also innovative. The following is a description of Serban's production of Medea which appeared in an article by Henry Hewes:

. . . Isolated in the limbo of a long subterranean corridor, we sense something inevitable and awesome waiting for us in the dark adjoining room. A black woman advances up the corridor speaking ancient Greek. Although we don't understand the words, her anxiety and terror are totally expressed with her eyes, in her frenzied mouth, and above all in her voice, which seems to emanate from some transmitter located deep inside her.

. . . From this point on, we don't so much follow the story, which is a mixture of Euripedes (spoken in Greek) and Seneca (spoken in Latin), as participate in its events as rites.¹⁹

In the same article, Hewes gives us a brief glimpse of the rehearsal process for the production, as described to him by Serban. For Medea, the dialogue was to be in classical Latin and Greek. To keep the audience abreast of the plot a few speeches in Elizabethan English were used. But Serban found that these insertions broke the flow and he later discarded them. During the rehearsals, the aim was to make everything emerge out of the play and the actors' responses to one another. The actors learned to feel and imitate sounds from 2,500 years ago. They attempted to make Greek and Latin come out of their emotions so truly that the lines never became something

19. Henry Hewes, "The Theatre: Subterranean Sounds Surfacing," The Saturday Review, March 11, 1972, p. 12.

recited. They found centers in their bodies out of which their voices could resonate without straining their vocal cords. Although many of their rehearsal exercises were physical, Serban eventually eliminated as much of the physical dynamics as he could, because he wanted to communicate the emotion of Medea through sound.

The following from a review by Richard Eder of Serban's 1978 production of Sganarelle at Yale shows Serban's approach to the classics.

Mr. Serban . . . treats Molière's short pieces with the same apparent irreverence he used with The Trojan Women and The Cherry Orchard. I say "apparent" because although he has his lapses, his most essential characteristic is a passion to get closer to the plays. He never exploits the classics for esthetic reasons, nor to extract from them some contemporary fashion or bias. He rips at them to get at meanings, to break up the habits we have acquired in seeing or reading them. Sometimes he rips too far, and sometimes the effort obscures their character rather than revealing it. But there is no frivolity at work, only a conscientious audacity that at its best produces extraordinary theatre and at its worst has the innocence of a failed experiment.²⁰

Serban goes on with his ground-breaking work and tries as much as possible to use performers from his Great Jones Repertory Project, e.g., Priscilla Smith, in his productions. He bemoans the fact that he is not always able to employ performers who have the training and background he would like.

20. Richard Eder, "Serban Directs Molière Bill at Yale," The New York Times, January 30, 1978, Section C, p. 18.

As we have seen, the above-mentioned groups and directors provided new sources of energy for the American theatre and yet none approached the classics or opera in the same manner as Witcover and the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre.

CHAPTER III
THE OFF-BROADWAY AND OFF-OFF-BROADWAY
THEATRE IN THE SIXTIES

In the sixties, the political and social atmosphere was rapidly changing in America. The country was in a state of political and artistic turmoil. Intellectuals, revolutionaries, and radicals from all over America congregated in New York City where a host of non-Broadway theatres emerged. The scene was set for Witcover and the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre in two ways: (1) other groups were not approaching the theatre in the way Witcover would, thus leaving a void for him to fill, and (2) the success of some groups (a brief description of the most celebrated will follow), led him to believe a non-commercial workshop was feasible by the end of the sixties.

The Off-Off-Broadway theatre started as a series of quasi-amateur groups with small budgets; the participants were unpaid. The role of experimentation played by the Off-Broadway theatre of the fifties was gradually assumed by this new movement. Between 1960 and 1965, Off-Off-Broadway groups presented about four hundred new plays

by over two hundred new playwrights.¹

However, not all the Off-Off-Broadway productions were avant-garde and experimental; the majority were showcases for actors, directors, and playwrights who wished to move on to the commercial theatre and cinema.

Caffé Cino: The Off-Off-Broadway movement may have had its beginnings with Joe Cino who opened a coffee house on Cornelia Street in Greenwich Village in 1958. It was basically an art gallery where, occasionally, plays were performed. Soon young playwrights and actors flocked to the caffé and by 1961, Cino was producing poetry readings and dramatic productions with a previously unheard-of frequency. This led to other such groups and places for theatre which became known as "off-Off-Broadway" in 1960 when Jerry Tallmer, then a critic for The Village Voice, started to use the term.

La Mama Experimental Theatre Club: started by Ellen Stewart, an important figure in the Off-Off-Broadway movement. She was a clothing designer who began to present plays in a basement in 1961. While often using Equity actors and professional directors, La Mama mostly produced unfinished works or works in progress. La Mama introduced new playwrights like Lanford Wilson as well as

1. Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay, Century Of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since 1870 (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 711.

groups with a new approach to theatre like the Open Theatre directed by Joseph Chaikin.

The Open Theatre and Joe Chaikin: In 1962, a group of students who had studied with Nola Chilton, a "method" teacher, started the Open Theatre as a place where they could experiment and work. Catherine Mandas, one of the students, invited Joseph Chaikin who had been an actor with the Living Theatre since 1959 and had performed in works by Pirandello, Brecht, Jack Gelber, Paul Goodman, and William Carlos Williams, to lead the group. Chaikin understood the problems that "method"-trained actors faced when performing non-naturalistic plays, and he had tried on two occasions to start workshops for the actors within the Living Theatre.²

This new group expanded certain exercises Chilton had evolved to help actors approach non-naturalistic material in a craftsmanlike way. Chaikin also wished to redefine the limits of the stage experience.³ He dreamt of a theatre where things changed nightly and wished to stress the vitality of the actors presence. Naturalistic performance would be rejected in the revitalization of non-

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2. Robert Pasolli, A Book on the Open Theatre (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1970), p. 2.
 3. Joseph Chaikin, "An Interview with Joe Chaikin." Questions prepared by Richard Schechner, Tulane Drama Review IX, 1964, pp. 191-197.

verbal theatre. Actors in the group were obliged to make a personal commitment to the material and subordinate themselves to a group dynamic in which everyone would contribute to the shaping of a piece. Chaikin's overall view of the theatrical event was colored by his belief in the universality of human experience, rather than the uniqueness of individual self-expression.⁴

As the Open Theatre moved toward production, a flexible method of work evolved. The playwright supplied an outline of ideas and scenes on which the actors would improvise. Gradually, the script would take form, as the writer and director edited and selected the most effective elements developed by the troupe--a truly cooperative effort of playwright, director, and actor. The ensemble de-emphasized costume and scenery. Actors wore rehearsal clothing like coveralls or leotards. Within the play, changes of locale were established through pantomime, dialogue, or the manipulation of the few set pieces or platforms which remained on the stage during the spectacle.

The Open Theatre first appeared before the public in December 1963, when it gave two performances at the Sheridan Square Theatre. The program advised the audience:

4. Ross Wetzsteon, "Chaikin and O'Horgan Survive the Explosive 60s," The Village Voice, November 3, 1975, p. 81.

What you will see tonight is a phase of work of the Open Theatre. This group of actors, musicians, playwrights, and directors has come together out of a dissatisfaction with the established trend in the contemporary theatre. It is now seeking a theatre for today. It is now exploring certain specific aspects of the stage, not as a production group, but as a group trying to find its own voice.⁵

The program went on to describe the tenets of the workshop: (a) to create a situation in which actors can play together with a sensitivity to one another necessary for an ensemble; (b) to explore the specific powers that only live theatre possesses; (c) to concentrate on a theatre of abstraction and illusion as opposed to a theatre of behavioral or psychological motivation; (d) to discover ways in which an artist can find his expression without money as the determining factor.

In 1965, the group presented an evening of one-act plays called America Hurrah at the La Mama Theatre. The first play, called Pavanne, was written following the work process of the group by Jean-Claude van Itallie, but retitled Interview when the production was moved to an Off-Broadway house. The Open Theatre continued to present unusual productions which were often performed under the auspices of Ellen Stewart, such as Viet Rock which emerged from a group workshop run by Megan Terry on Saturdays

5. The Open Theatre Program, December 1963, from the Open Theatre Folder, The Lincoln Center Library of the Performing Arts, New York, N.Y.

during 1965-66. It was worked up out of a series of improvisations and the action was developed through disjointed episodes, cabaret numbers, and actors' "transformations." The piece followed the careers of seven American soldiers from birth to death; it was satirical, and criticized both belligerent sides in the Viet Nam conflict, pointing out the absurdity and obscenity of war, and the pious platitudes of those who create it.⁶ Viet Rock had a scattered dramatic structure, and although it attacked both sides in the conflict, it did so from a left-wing and pacifist stance. The most prominent feature of the spectacle was its physical production, rather than its text. Actors became tanks and airplanes against an unusual background of sound and choreography. Viet Rock was the first full-length play developed improvisationally by a writer and the troupe. In Terry's workshop, the actors had examined the war in Viet Nam. They discussed, abstracted, and improvised newspaper clippings, television reports, and events from first-hand observation in both the United States and Viet Nam. The underlying motives for the war were examined; patriotic rhetoric was taken apart; the feelings aroused by the events of the conflict were scrutinized. The troupe explored the impulses of men toward aggression, hostility, and destructiveness,

6. Robert Brustein, The Third Theatre (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. 8.

and tried to understand the fears and insecurities which create it.

Done without sets, costumes, or props, except for benches where the actors rested when they were not involved in a particular scene, the work created the effect of a theatrical event that had an element of the amateur in a positive way; of a work created and performed by people who were vitally concerned about the war in Viet Nam.

For Chaikin, celebrity came with time. After having assisted Peter Brook in his production of U.S. a year earlier, in 1967 Chaikin agreed to cooperate on a production of America Hurrah at the Royal Court Theatre in London. In 1968, he worked with Brook in Paris but their efforts were aborted by the political upheaval of that year. Chaikin subsequently worked with Jerzy Grotowski, and the Open Theatre functioned both in New York and on tour until late 1973, when Chaikin decided to take a sabbatical. Recently, Chaikin has returned to acting and directing.

The Judson Poets' Theatre: formed by Al Carmines, the assistant pastor of the Judson Memorial Church on Washington Square, who obtained \$600.00 to subsidize an arts program which included dance and theatre in 1961. Carmines, also a composer, became a leader in the Off-Off-Broadway movement with his small musicals. He directed

many of the productions at the church while Lawrence Kornfeld directed others. In 1969, Carmines created a musical adaptation of Aristophanes' Peace and wrote Promenade with Maria Irene Fornes. The programs at the church were varied and included works of Strindberg, Gertrude Stein, "happenings," and pop-art pieces like Gorilla Queen. The Judson Poets' Theatre has provided a place for young performers to showcase their talents and some of the productions have moved to Off-Broadway houses, but it is not an ensemble company, and fosters no particular philosophy of theatre.

Theatre Genesis: formed in 1964 by Ralph Cook at the Church of St. Mark's in the Bowery. As a playwrights' theatre which had as its goal the assistance of new and young playwrights, it ignored the classics. Cook encouraged playwrights to work closely with the actors during rehearsals to shape and reshape their material. At Theatre Genesis, a script was always regarded as a work in progress. Between July, 1964, and March 1968, thirty-nine plays by twenty-one writers were produced, among them Sam Shepard, Leonard Melfi, Murray Mednick, Anthony Barsha, and Tom Sankey.

The Theatre of the Ridiculous: created in 1965 by Ronald Tavel, who had worked for Andy Warhol as a film scenarist. His partners in the enterprise were John Vaccaro, Bill Walters, and his brother Harvey Tavel.

Ronald Tavel wrote the scripts and John Vaccaro directed until the two came to a parting of the ways in 1967, when Tavel left to present The Gorilla Queen at the Judson Poets' Theatre. The piece was a pop-art version of a thirties movie; campy and in many ways outrageous. It led to a trend in the theatre which was to both condemn and be amused by popular culture forms and nostalgia. Other groups joined the movement, using the names, Theatre of the Ridiculous and the Ridiculous Theatre Company. Charles Ludlam, a young playwright and actor, became a part of the movement and to this day his theatre company functions, occasionally presenting camp versions of the classics.

The American Place Theatre: begun in 1964 under the leadership of Wynn Handman, the artistic director, and Sidney Lanier, the producer, with grants from the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. They wished to produce serious original plays that were not being given a stage in New York, and encouraged writers, poets, novelists, and philosophers who were not necessarily playwrights to create dramatic literature. The works of gifted men and women like Paul Goodman, Robert Lowell, Joyce Carol Oates, Sam Shepard, Ed Bullins, and Jack Gelber were presented. Until 1971, the group was housed at St. Clement's Church but it now has a permanent home on West 46th Street.

Supported by grants and subscribers, the American Place Theatre is a sturdy institution which is attempting to prepare audiences for the serious plays of tomorrow's American theatre.

CHAPTER IV
SELECTED INNOVATIVE TRENDS AND PROBLEMS
IN THE PRESENTATION OF OPERA

In striking contrast to the greater scenic reality provided by new technical devices, the primary dramatic forms of opera--the arias, duets, and ensembles--are still generally presented as they have been for centuries. Many opera companies like the Metropolitan Opera, the City Opera, and the Boston Opera now go out of their ways to hire permanent or adjunct stage directors. However, the picture is changing slowly, and it would be legitimate to say that the change is, in some way, due to the efforts of Walt Witcover and others. Yet opera generally remains a "musical" work and vocal display remains for spectator and critic the prime basis (and bias) of modern opera performance. Often the play or piece that the opera was originally based on is overlooked, and the poet or librettist of the work is almost unknown.

Over the years, the "musician," whether in the pit or on the stage, has become the central force in opera. At various times in the history of opera, the singers were

in control, and at times the composers. In the twentieth century, the show has been run by the conductors, such as Toscanini, Fürtwangler, Solti, von Karajan, and Rudel. As a result, the drama in opera is largely invisible, supplanted by sound and expensive scenery. Sometimes audiences, while enchanted by what they hear, are indifferent to what they see--productions that are static, arbitrary, and ridden with acting clichés.

In many ways producing opera in most modern opera houses is a relic of the nineteenth century theatre. At that time, the star actors would travel from town to town, as managers and contracts dictated, joining the local company in time for the performance and, perhaps, a sketchy rehearsal. Actors or singers knew their roster of roles and, as a rule, kept to their various "lines"--character, lead, ingenue, first lady. The other cast members supported the star, who often directed their movements.

The main obstacles to better acting in opera are five-fold. First, few performers possess first-rate singing and first-rate acting talent together. The special distinction of Chaliapin, Lehmann, and Callas shows how rare is the singer with a dramatic instinct that matches a great voice. Second, the immensely high cost of producing opera in Western Europe and North America leads to minimal expenditures of time for re-

hearsal and the use of traditional short cuts to create acceptable performances. Third, singers do not give evidence of motivation; they are usually hired for their vocal prowess. This deficiency is reinforced by audiences and critics who often applaud acting that is inept but conforms to the traditional form and mannerisms of a given role. The fourth obstacle to better acting in opera is far more subtle. Singers have been conditioned to receive their vocal score complete at the hands of conductors and coaches who pass on "correct" (traditional) interpretations of roles. The modern stage actor most generally creates his own melody, pitch, tempo, and interpretation for his text; the opera singer, however, has these dynamics dictated to him. The proficient stage actor knows that, under the guidance of the director, he himself will develop his acting "score," or sequence of inner actions and external behavior, and his intentions will be personal and fresh; but the opera singer assumes that he needs only a bit of coaching to be ready to perform a role once he has learned the music. Finally, the opera singer who is called upon to embody and enact the most extravagant and deeply-felt of human passions, and express them in the most precise and demanding vocal terms, does not usually include the study of acting technique in his preparation for a career. Often, singing teachers and vocal coaches are convinced that good acting is not

feasible in opera, and convey that fallacy to their students. Musical conservatories rarely provide acting classes. This lack of training in acting technique leads the singer into such bad operatic habits as indicating the emotion, assuming attitudes, wandering on the stage, and playing to the house.

The experience of Stanislavski proved that good acting, coming from a free and expressive body, helps the singer to use his voice better. Stanislavski himself was trained as an actor by the great Russian opera singer, Fyodor Kommissarjevsky. Stanislavski always believed instinctively that music could enhance the effectiveness of an actor because the work of a fine composer provides a powerful score or base from which dramatic expression can derive not only its stimulus, but also its direction. Stanislavski lived until the late thirties, and continued as a teacher.

Toward the end of his active directing career, in 1918, he established, at the urging of E. K. Malinovskaya, the manager of the State Theatre in Moscow, a studio to train young singers of the Moscow Opera Theatre. This project became known as the Opera Studio of the Bolshoi Theatre. The goal assigned to the studio was to bring about a renaissance of opera traditions and raise the cultural level of the actors-singers. Stanislavski's personal goal was to mold these singers into a synthesis

of singer-actor-musician.

Initially, the workshops were only for singers from the Bolshoi who actually carried on their vocal development under their own masters. Stanislavski did not train their vocal instruments as such; however, his training in concentration and relaxation did enhance their vocal production. He taught the singers-actors to be so imbued with the deepest possible significance of every note in an opera and to feel themselves so entirely motivated by the music that they did not need to look at the conductor.

In October 1919, a group of young singers was taken into the studio where eventually, when ready, they performed in three pieces under Stanislavski's direction: Werther by Massenet (1921), Eugene Onegin by Tchaikovski (1922), and The Secret Marriage by Cimarosa (1925). Later, the studio was separated from the Bolshoi and after 1924, it was called the Stanislavski Opera Studio. In 1926 the studio was converted into the Opera Studio-Theatre and in 1928, into the Stanislavski Opera Theatre.¹

For his training of the actors-singers-musicians, Stanislavski used the same basic principles he had put together to train actors. Indeed, the only thing that

1. Constantin Stanislavski and Pavel Romyantsev, Stanislavski On Opera, translated and edited by Elisabeth Hapgood Reynolds (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1975), p. x.

made these performers unusual was that, at times in the theatre, they were obliged to burst into song.

Stanislavski's influence in the world of opera has been limited, as there has been resistance to his approach among opera teachers. Yet, his techniques have enhanced the work of Wieland Wagner and Walter Felsenstein--especially during the rehearsal process.

The Music Theatre of Walter Felsenstein

Walter Felsenstein was born in Vienna in 1901. In his early twenties he worked as an actor in Lubeck, Mannheim and other towns in Germany, and gradually became interested in directing not only plays but opera. Between 1927 and 1929, he staged nineteen plays and sixteen operas (among the latter, Meistersinger, Orfeo, Traviata, Ariadne, and Turandot), in Basel, Switzerland. After several years as a director in Freiburg, he became the first stage director of opera in Cologne in 1932 where he remained until 1934. His work began to receive acclaim; he staged a number of productions in Frankfurt and Berlin. Owing to the political environment in the Germany of the Third Reich, he was excluded from the Reichstheaterkammer which was the official organization of all stage employees at the time. He left for Zurich where he worked until 1940, staging both operas and operettas until Heinrich George, the actor, brought him to the Schiller Theatre in

Berlin. In 1941-42 he staged several operas in Aachen with Herbert von Karajan as the conductor. At the Salzburg Festival in 1942, his production of Figaro was a triumph. Shortly after the war, the Komische Oper was formed in Berlin with Felsenstein at the helm. He has also staged many operas at La Scala in Milan, in Hamburg, Moscow, and the Schwetzingen Summer Festival.

His innovations in musical theatre lie chiefly in the realm of performance. He expressed his goals during a lecture at the Academy of Music and the Performing Arts in Vienna in 1963:

The heart of music theatre is to turn music-making and singing on the stage into a communication that is convincing, truthful and utterly essential . . . Music theatre exists when a musical action with singing human beings becomes a theatrical reality that is unreservedly believable. The dramatic happening must take place on a level where music is the only means of expression. The performer must not give the effect of being an instrument or a component part of music that already exists, or of a marionette being manipulated by the music, but that of being its creative fashioner.²

Felsenstein wanted everyone taking part in a performance to be concerned with something so "unspeakably" significant and moving that he could communicate in no other fashion than singing. Felsenstein felt that the

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2. Peter Paul Fuchs, quoting Walter Felsenstein, The Music Theatre of Walter Felsenstein, edited by P.P. Fuchs (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1975), p. 15.

traditional production of opera did not allow for that, and that it was rare to see operatic pieces in which the action of the piece was transformed through music and singing into a theatrical reality that was unconditionally plausible. He never considered a singer to be different from an actor, but in reality an actor who also has the ability to add to his expression by singing. He stated:

The highest aspiration within the music theatre must be not to consider singing and acting separate functions.³

For him, the actor's task was to make the audience believe that every statement he made came from a recognizable motivation, and that through this motivation alone, his emotion grew to a point where he discovered singing, and used singing in exactly the manner the composer desired. He wanted his performers to create the feeling of spontaneity that is so rare on the operatic stage. The actor-singer had to find within himself the correct motivation for every statement he made or, in other words, make the concerns of the character he was portraying so unconditionally and consistently his own that to him and to the audience, all basic musical functions--rhythm, meter, harmony, tempo, and dynamics--did not appear to be prescribed by the score or the

3. Ibid., p. 140.

conductor, but seemed to be determined by his, the character's, own intentions and sensations. It was felt that only with this approach would the actor-singer be able to arrive at his own creative ideas and thereby bring more "life" to his role.

For Felsenstein, the really good actor-singer was able to reveal to the spectator the entire life of the character he was portraying, beyond the stage action and the text. In this way, he increased the involvement of the spectator to a point where the imagination of the spectator was able to make the character even more real than the performer's acting did. The more the action and the characters of the piece captured the imagination of the spectator and stimulated thought concerning his own life, the more the play would be found interesting. In a lecture delivered during a master class in Bayreuth in 1959, he spoke of the effect this should have on an audience. He said:

We act together; thereby my existence as the spectator ends and his as the actor; my consciousness that it is a play has disappeared, and I perceive the happening as more truthful than any reality.⁴

As an opera director, Felsenstein felt one of his most important tasks was to create the proper space or setting for the work--to transmit it into a definite, dramatic place of action; to bring the setting into his

4. Ibid., p. 30.

projection. After the conductor, he felt the set designer was the most important collaborator he had. For him, the musical drama had to find its world. It had to be settled in a definite space which became the whole world. The director and designer had to create this space without clinging to prejudice and conventions so that the world created was indeed specific to the individual production. Felsenstein had a sense of the purpose of theatre which was not unlike that of many of the practitioners of today. Seeking the primitive magic of theatre, he felt that modern man had lost touch with his primitive beginnings and was frozen into a civilization that lacked mystery and that he (modern man) longed for those beginnings. Felsenstein believed that in art, in the theatre, man could experience the recreation of the primitive and rediscover it in himself. This was the theatre's humanistic purpose. This is akin to the ambition of Artaud.

One of the chief problems Felsenstein faced in carrying out his goals was singers who lacked acting training. This was especially true when he traveled to foreign cities to stage works with performers other than those of his own company. Also, with other opera companies, it was often impossible to spend the months of rehearsals that he was allowed with his own company.

In 1962, Rolf Lieberman, the Swiss-born composer,

invited Felsenstein to stage Rigoletto in Hamburg.

During a conversation on May 4, Felsenstein said:

Unfortunately singers are trained by their teachers to do nothing but sing. Even talented singers have lost their basic respect for music; it has become something that is simply there.⁵

However, Felsenstein never abandoned his ideals and constantly strove to bring new life to a form that was heavy with tradition. The following statement from a conversation with Hans-Rainer John, Editor-in-Chief of the periodical, Theater Der Zeit (Issue 8 of 1962) sums up Felsenstein's thoughts on singing:

. . . singing onstage is nothing other than acting. If the physical action impedes the singing, then this action is faulty in its primary intention and in its expression. For even singing is merely a part of making music; it is no different from an instrumental part in the orchestra, which belongs to the actor no less than singing. After all, singing is not first and foremost the technical production of vocal sounds. It is chiefly a human statement that has been evoked by an inner process and is thus insuppressible and cannot be dispensed with; it goes far beyond speaking because it gives expression to what can no longer be conveyed by words alone.⁶

He felt it was important for the music theatre to create situations that call forth music, and that a singer who knows only his vocal part, and not the entire

5. Ibid., p. 117.

6. Ibid., "A Conversation with Hans-Rainer John," Theater Der Zeit, Issue 8, 1962, pp. 140-141.

instrumental substance, was bound to be a slave to the conductor's beat. Therefore, his knowledge of the score should be so all-encompassing that he could bring forth the music himself--that he did not obey the music but release it so that the orchestra could accompany him exactly as the score demanded.

The Work of Wieland Wagner

Wieland Wagner, an opera producer and theoretician, has proven to be an impressive innovator in the opera of our time. His ideas on opera resemble to some extent those of Stanislavski, however, he also shows the influence of Appia and Craig in his work. Wieland Wagner, a grandson of Richard Wagner, died in 1966, at the age of forty-nine. His production of Parsifal, which reopened the Bayreuth Festival after the Second World War, in 1951, displayed his ground-breaking approach to the works of his grandfather which were to affect (although only slightly) opera production throughout the world. His talent and originality in operatic productions was also applied to the works of composers as diverse as Glück, Beethoven, Verdi, Bizet, Richard Strauss, Berg, and Orff. His productions were attacked by critics, but just as often defended by the same critics who always found his work exciting and his theories invigorating.

He produced some operas in other European cities

in the years from 1951 until his death, however, he was most at home in Bayreuth where he had the means at his disposal to put his theories into practice. He was a revolutionary who grudgingly admitted he owed a lot to Adolphe Appia, Gordon Craig, and Bertolt Brecht; for he deviated from their theories as much as he adhered to them.

Departing from tradition, he worked as much as possible with a bare stage, a minimum of scenery, and an economy of movement; always acutely aware of the visual element in his work. He paid meticulous attention to every component of his work, spending hours of rehearsal time on his groupings of crowd scenes and the movements that led up to or dissolved them. Wagner attempted, whenever he could, to work directly with every individual chorus member, making it clear that each of them had something unique to contribute to the production.

His approach to a text necessitated a great deal of rehearsal time as well as performers who were trained and therefore able to work his way. Often in a normal opera house, contractual obligations made miscasting inevitable. For the most part at Bayreuth, he had his pick of conductors and singers from all over the world, and was able to select performers whose working habits he knew. This was not often the case, however, when he was a guest director at other opera houses.

Wieland Wagner was convinced that his grandfather

had conceived music dramas that were psychologically coherent. He said: "Psychoanalysis plays a large role in Parsifal, it explains on a human level the action and the characters."⁷ Therefore, the words and music of an opera were the expression of these psychological ideas and consequently the music of an opera had to follow the action; never dictate it. He expressed his central philosophy about musical theatre as follows:

With all the great composers who wrote for the theatre the initial impulse was not the music, but the theatrical idea. The music is secondary in the sense that without the dramatic idea it would never have been written. The idea itself inspires the music, which is consequently not the dominant factor, but only one of the components to which the visual realization has to conform.⁸

Wagner asserted that the relationship between music and scenic interpretation was not one of cause and effect. The scene, the idea was paramount; scenic action and musical development did not run parallel to each other in any direct sense, but corresponded with one another on a spiritual plane. Music could and should serve only to illuminate the mind or state of mind of the stage character, to reveal the psychological background.

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7. Wieland Wagner, Entretiens avec Wieland Wagner, edited by Antoine Golia. (The translation is by the author of this dissertation). (Paris: Éditions Pierre Belfond, 1967). p. 50.
 8. Geoffrey Skelton, quoting Wieland Wagner, Wieland Wagner: The Positive Sceptic (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971), p. 132.

Rehearsals were always conducted with the music played on a piano although the singers were not expected to sing with full voice. As Wagner disapproved of stage action which merely echoed the music, it would seem that he could have achieved his aims more quickly without a musical accompaniment, but in fact he needed it, not only because it set the pace at which he wanted the action to move, but also because it challenged the singer to resist consciously the movement which the music urged him to make.

In the rehearsal process, Wagner was always flexible, if not in regard to his final goal, at least in the ways of reaching it. With constant repetition, with ideas tried out and discarded, the rehearsal process was slow. Often after a few days, nothing at all was left of the original pattern, and so many alternatives had been tried that one wondered how the performers could possibly remember the acting choices that they were to use in the performance. This tedious process took place because Wagner wanted to obtain from a singer an interpretation which arose from the singer's own personality and was allied to Wagner's view of the character the singer was playing. Geoffrey Skelton, the biographer, describes Wagner's rehearsal techniques:

Wieland Wagner's first step as a producer is to ensure that the singer has a clear idea of the character he is depicting and understands how this person would react to the situations

in which he finds himself. These discussions between producer and singer on the psychological aspects, which take place before the rehearsals actually begin, are acknowledged by the singers themselves to be of great value, particularly if they have sung the role in other places before and have thought of it only from the singing point of view.⁹

Wagner, though he had firm ideas of the character, was not dogmatic about the means of expressing it. The whole process was one of mutual search for a means of fitting the character to the personality of the singer portraying it. Since Wagner's aim was to present the operas in a way that was effective according to modern conceptions of behavior, he had to get into the singer's head not only the sense of what was being said but also the emotional level on which it was expressed. His method, though it may seem outwardly crude, was effective. He simply translated words and reactions into terms of everyday life. Wagner's attempt to make the personality of the performer an integral part of the interpretation of the piece also applied to the conductor. In practice, he often found it necessary to adapt certain movements to fit the conductor's tempi. He tried to arrive at these adjustments organically, so that the results were not superimposed on the performer but stemmed from the deep

9. Geoffrey Skelton, Wagner at Bayreuth: Experiment and Tradition (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1964), pp. 178-179.

psychological awareness of the character he was portraying.

As a producer-director, he involved himself with all aspects of the production, keeping a tight rein on all of his collaborators. He defended his approach, stating:

A director who does not do his own scene designs and costumes is only half a director. A mise-en-scène supposes a conception of the ensemble, the normal result of the thought of one person, of his sensibility in relation to a work . . . All modern mise-en-scène is a choreography of the ensemble, under the laws of which all must bend, the movements, the costumes, set design, hair-dos, etc. Naturally, such a mise-en-scène could be the result of a collaboration, as one can see reaching its perfection in the company of Brecht. But it can equally be born in the brain of one person.¹⁰

Wagner cites as examples of this kind of director Visconti, Zeffirelli, and Menotti. The choice of costume and the creation of the place for the performer were never arbitrary, for they too had to evolve from the meaning of the opera. He dressed his characters and stage only in conjunction with the dramatic values of the opera; production values had to be faithful, precise, and never merely "beautiful."

An exact costume, an apt costume, helps the performer understand the character and the situation of the person he must create . . . The scenic decors, on their side, are destined to render clear not only the characteristics of each place which I have mentioned, but also, each time, the fundamental dramatic situation.¹¹

10. Ibid, quoting Wieland Wagner, pp. 98-99.

11. Ibid., p. 103.

But in his decor and costume designs he had the boldness of the pioneer. Despite adverse criticism, he remained true to his ideals.

Being faithful to the time in which a work was written seems to me false, because it leads, fatally, if one respects it, to an old-fashioned *mise-en-scène*. I believe that one should deal with all works of the musical theatre as if they were just written.¹²

Often, he changed the time and place of his operas in his attempt to bring new meaning to them.

In defending Wieland Wagner's changes against attacks by the establishment, and in justifying his approach, Geoffrey Skelton wrote:

An elaborate set imposes its own conditions and affects the movement as well as the positioning of the actors. He likes to leave himself elbow-room, so that he can obtain different patterns with different singers without having to adapt his set. But there is more behind his thinking than mere practical convenience. He has a horror of the conventional. A gesture or movement undertaken just because it has always been done that way is for him the unforgivable sin. Every movement must, to be effective, come straight from the inner conviction of the moment.¹³

Yet, the contributions of Wieland Wagner lie chiefly in his theories. He realized some of his goals in many of his productions at Bayreuth, but his work was often undercut by the limitations of his actors-singers.

12. Ibid., p. 59.

13. Ibid. Geoffrey Skelton is not quoting Wagner here. P. 182.

Not having a school or conservatory in which to train his singers-actors, as did Stanislavski, he was often obliged to train them during the rehearsal process. This was obviously not the ideal situation. He had the restlessness of the experimenter, however, and although his goals were clear, he did not delude himself into thinking he had attained them. Perhaps we can see his perception of this in the following statement:

In Fidelio, all the characters have an absolute psychological justification . . . As far as I am concerned, I have done all I can to show the just and profound unity of these characters. I will continue to experiment; I haven't yet produced Fidelio for the last time.¹⁴

He said this in 1966, the year of his death.

Some Ideas On Musical Theatre
From Tyrone Guthrie and Robert Lewis

Tyrone Guthrie wrote an article entitled, "Adieu, 'Old' Met!" found in his book, In Various Directions:

What a glorious thing a really great performance of opera can be! It occurs only very, very rarely. Performances at the Met and Covent Garden, in Paris, Berlin, Dresden, Milan, Stockholm, and everywhere else are frequently feeble and dreary and sometimes ridiculous . . .¹⁵

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14. Ibid., quoting Wieland Wagner, p. 65.
15. Tyrone Guthrie, "Adieu, 'Old' Met!," In Various Directions (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1965), pp. 199-200.

Guthrie suggests that the Met might be sublime more often than it is if two reforms could be affected. The first would be to put on fewer productions in a season. This would give more time for preparation. The second reform lies almost entirely in the hands of the public. At present more interest is focused on great performers than upon either the works in which they appear or in the ensemble which surrounds them, which means that the predominant aim of the Metropolitan Opera is to acquire great voices rather than to present a distinguished ensemble in order to satisfy the public.

Robert Lewis has directed many musicals and operas such as Marc Blitzstein's Regina. The following is an excerpt in which he discusses part of his rehearsal process for musical theatre and opera:

I did it in opera where the kind of stiff, singing-actor is equal to the verse-actor who has no inner psychology to back himself up. The problem there is more aggravated because the mechanism of singing is even more involved than the problem of producing the spoken tones. I was glad to have the opportunity to try to solve this, since singing is a further step in the extension of ordinary speech into poetry. What I did was to take a scene from the libretto and rehearse it first by speaking, instead of singing, the words without any attention to the musical form at all. I worked for all of the things you would work for if you were just doing a realistic play. I rehearsed for understanding of the characters, for connection between the people, for talking and listening, etc.¹⁶

16. Robert Lewis, Method or Madness? (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1958), pp. 130-131.

Lewis would have the actors go through the same section with the piano playing the music, talking instead of singing. Then they had to fit their acting into the time space of the music--trying to keep their acting values as intact as possible. They had to adjust their acting to the spatial demands of the form. As an example, if a singer had said before, "Hello, how are you?" and now found that he had two bars of music playing between the "Hello" and the "How are you?", he had to find out whether to continue to surprise of the "Hello" or start the desire to find out how they are during those two bars. He now had to extend his "intention," his thinking, through what ordinarily would be an unconscionably long pause if the music were not playing. On the other hand, he may have found that it was a very fast passage, and where before, without the music, he had languidly drawled, "Gosh, I wish I didn't have to leave this beautiful lecture hall . . .", the music now took a quarter of the time he had been using. Whatever he had been working for in his acting now had to be condensed so that what he was thinking or feeling could fit into that smaller space of time. Lewis feels that, in a good opera, if the composer has some knowledge of the theatre, the singer is forced into improving his acting because the composer has given him tempi compatible with the

emotional content of the scene.

Walt Witcover and Leyna Gabriele both feel they owe a great deal to Robert Lewis and that his work in musical theatre encouraged them to go on.

PART III

THE BEGINNINGS

CHAPTER V
THE EARLY HISTORY
OF MASTERWORKS LABORATORY THEATRE

Walt Witcover was born in New York City in 1924 where his father was a sculptor and composer, and his mother a lecturer on the arts. His parents gave him a taste for the classics and the opera at a very early age. He went to Cornell University because he received a scholarship there. Having no particular focus at the time, he followed a liberal arts course. In the summer of 1942 his college career was interrupted in his junior year by wartime service in Europe, but he returned to Cornell and graduated cum laude in February 1946, with a B.A. in speech and drama. In 1947, he was awarded his M.A. in dramatic production from the same university. In 1948, he became an artist in residence at the National Theatre Conference at Stanford University, California, where he acted in the classics, The Rivals, L'Arlésienne, and The Miser. That summer, the opera department did a production of Peter Grimes which impressed him greatly. He felt it was approached with a sense of truth in the acting values. That fall, he saw a production of The Miser Off-Broadway,

directed by Dan Levitt who was a practitioner of the "method." Witcover says it was as if something exploded in his head. This production excited him because he saw that classics could be performed with a great deal of truth and reality.

In 1949, he started to study in New York at the Theatre Wing while finding work directing in local community theatres. At the Theatre Wing he was exposed to the "method" by his acting and directing teachers, Herbert Berghof, Curt Conway, and Lee Strasberg. It was here that he began to discover the "process" that we will examine in this dissertation.

In the spring of 1951, Witcover returned to Europe as a theatrical specialist for the U.S. Air Forces in Europe where he ran a theatre at the Air Base of Landsberg, Bavaria. He directed both adult and children's plays, designed and executed sets and lights, and taught courses in drama. After returning to New York he worked Off-Broadway and directed his first summer stock production in 1953. The next season he directed the Equity Library Theatre production of The Hasty Heart. A summer "package" of the same play starring Farley Granger followed.

In the spring of 1955, his production of Maedchen In Uniform won prizes for the leading actress, Anne Meara. Barbara Barrie was also in the cast. Witcover had re-translated the play and incorporated locales and scenes

from the novel which helped create a cinematic fluidity for the play. The next season he co-produced and directed a production of three one-act farce comedies, How She Lied To Her Husband by G.B. Shaw, Box and Cox by John Maddison Morton, and A Merry Play by John Heywood. This program called Three Times Three had three players, Anne Meara, Charles Nelson Reilly, and Jerry Stiller. The director and actors together tried to bring an organic or "method" approach to the material. However, the play opened as scheduled, and Witcover feels it was not ready. Inexperienced as all concerned were with this approach to classic material, they had not allowed enough time for the rehearsal "process."

Simultaneously, he began to teach acting, and in 1957, Stella Adler invited him to direct a workshop production of O'Casey's Red Roses For Me at her studio. At this time he taught acting for singers at the John Mace Studio, at the same time supporting himself as a stage manager and lighting designer. A highly acclaimed Off-Broadway production of James Joyce's Exiles followed.

Paul V. Beckley wrote in The Herald Tribune:

A new and plushy Off-Broadway theatre, the Renata, was opened last night down at 144 Bleeker St. with a thoughtful and moving production of James Joyce's single dramatic writing, "Exiles." Fans of Joyce will find it a must.

. . . This group of six actors, superbly directed by Walt Witcover, who must have been long a devotee of Joyce to have kept everything

within bounds in this play, have done a remarkable job of keeping the boiling point always apparent just under the deceptive quiet of the surface . . .
 . . . Altogether, it is a fine production and a fitting tribute to an unusually well-fitted new theatre.¹

Richard Watts, Jr. wrote in The Post:

It is vastly helped by the acting. There is a particularly fine, intelligent and varied performance by Michael Kane as the writer's friend, and Mark Lenard manages the insufferable intellectuality of the writer convincingly. Jutta Wold makes the wife sympathetically human, and Betty Miller is excellent as the frightened young woman who loves the central figure. It's understandable why "Exiles" is so rarely produced, but the admirable revival gets the best out of it.²

In The Village Voice, Jerry Tallmer declared:

A marvelous set of actors under Walt Witcover's marvelously fine-spirited direction have made James Joyce's "Exiles" spring alive in beauty at the new Renata Theatre on Bleeker Street, in what is to me the most courageous and exciting production so far to be seen anywhere this season.³

And in an article on page one of Section 2 of the Sunday Times, March 24, 1957, Brooks Atkinson wrote:

. . . Part of the impression "Exiles" makes in the theatre is derived from the excellence of

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1. Paul V. Beckley, "Joyce's 'Exiles' Is Staged At The Renata Theatre," The New York Herald Tribune, March 13, 1957, p. 18.
 2. Richard Watts, Jr., "James Joyce's Play Called 'Exiles'," The New York Post, March 13, 1957, p. 71.
 3. Jerry Tallmer, "Theatre: 'Exiles'," The Village Voice, March 20, 1957, p. 7.

the performance. Although the script looks intractable, the performance has a coherent point of view in which, like Joyce, the characters accept the circumstances of their existence. Walt Witcover, the director, has not tried to theatricalize a script that is closer to the library than the stage.

. . . Mr. Witcover recognizes the fact that "Exiles" is essentially a reverie. The characters are less concerned with events than with impulses that lie beneath the surface and are consistently baffled. Nothing conclusive occurs. We can be grateful for a performance that accepts these limitations and also for the existence of an attractive, small theatre in which a play in a low key can be acted without being lifeless.⁴

Later, Witcover directed commercial summer stock tours of The Reluctant Debutante starring Ruth Chatterton and Arthur Treacher with Sandy Dennis in the title role, and The Waltz of the Toreadors with Claude Dauphin and Lili Darvas. In 1960, Herbert Berghof invited him to teach acting technique and scene study at the Herbert Berghof Studio where he still teaches acting, directing, and musical theatre. From 1978 until 1981, Witcover taught at SUNY Purchase, as a member of the theatre department.⁵

The idea of directing the classics and lyric theatre with a "method" approach had been germinating in the mind of Witcover for many years--since his training at the Theatre Wing. While his one attempt to apply these

4. Brooks Atkinson, "Joyce's Credo," The New York Times, March 24, 1957, Section 2, p. 1.

5. From Mr. Witcover's resume on file at The Masterworks Laboratory Theatre, 40 West 22 Street, New York, N.Y.

techniques to the production, Three Times Three, was not well-received by the critics, his goal remained the same. Witcover says that he was greatly moved and excited by Tyrone Guthrie's Shakespearean productions at Stratford, Ontario, and by Planchon's approach to Moliere, but it was when he saw the Berliner Ensemble perform Brecht that he realized the true power and excitement of the classics.

He said:

The Berliner Ensemble was not misled by theories of staging as put down by academics. In one scene they were really plucking chickens and in the next they were talking to the audience--breaking the fourth wall.⁶

In 1958, Witcover met Leyna Gabriele who was to become his student and one of the founders of Masterworks Laboratory Theatre.

Gabriele was born in West Virginia, where she studied voice as a child. After receiving her B.A. degree in English literature from Fairmont State College, W. Va., she moved to New York City to advance her singing career. Always interested in literature and language, she pursued studies in those fields as well as dance and voice in New York. She worked with Dr. Elmer Nagy in New York and at the Hart Music School in Hartford, Conn. In 1950-51, she won a Fulbright Scholarship to Italy to study voice. She trained with Mario Cordone, the conductor, in Milan, and

6. From an interview with Walt Witcover, June 16, 1980.

made her operatic debut at the Teatro Lirico in the same city, as Oscar in The Masked Ball. After returning to New York in 1952, she did summer stock and performed in a supper club, Chez Vito, where she sang a wide range of material from American ballads to Continental material. In 1956, she sang the title role in the world-premiere production of The Ballad of Baby Doe by Douglas Moore in Central City, Colorado, and later, Ophelia in the premiere of Sergius Kagan's Hamlet. She has also sung leading roles at the Boston Opera, Cincinnati Zoo Opera, Toledo-Dayton Opera, Lugano Opera, Trieste Opera, the San Carlo Opera of Naples, and in summer stock musical comedies.

Gabriele has also worked under the direction of Tito Copobianco, Laszlo Halasz, Nathaniel Merrill, and Joseph Papp. She has taught acting for singers at the Princeton Opera Workshop and SUNY, Purchase.

By 1958, Gabriele was looking for something deeper from her work. Not satisfied with her own acting in opera, and the work that others were doing in it, she had a vague notion that the traditional approach to lyric theatre only scratched the surface and that greater depth and richness could be brought to musical theatre. She decided to study acting with Witcover, at first learning the "method" while working on non-musical material. Eventually, she asked him if she could work on an operatic aria from La Traviata in class--breaking it down into

its beats, actions, and objectives to understand better what was happening in the song.⁷

For Gabriele, this was a new way of dealing with musical material. She had not worked with a voice coach or director until her meeting with Witcover, who had approached the work in this way. The result proved to be so stimulating to both Gabriele and Witcover that they decided to present it to the Directors Unit Workshop of the Actors Studio of which Witcover was a member. They would do one aria, "E Forse' Lui," from Act One of La Traviata and discuss the work process with the Actors Studio members. As their involvement grew, however, the project became more ambitious.

La Traviata was mounted as a series of experiments in theatrical opera which ultimately stretched over four years. Act I was first performed in March, 1966 at the Directors Unit of the Actors Studio. As a result of the excitement it generated, Lee Strasberg asked the group to show it to a wider audience and in May of 1966, it was presented as part of a series of six "Special Evenings" for members and patrons of the Actors Studio as well as invited professionals.

During this time, another figure, Richard Moss, entered the picture. Born in Brooklyn in 1932, Moss

7. From an interview with Leyna Gabriele, October 2, 1978.

attended Princeton, where he majored in economics. He later received his M.A. in English literature from the University of Massachusetts. After working as a journalist for a time, he became involved with the Open Theatre which led to his studying directing with Aaron Frankel, mime with Richard Moss, and acting with Walt Witcover at the Herbert Berghof Studio. Witcover eventually asked him to be stage manager for the La Traviata experiment which was in rehearsal at the Actors Studio. As stage manager, he also played in the production as the Major Domo at the party scene in Act I.⁸

After the initial success of the La Traviata experiment at the Actors Studio in May 1966, the work was temporarily discontinued because Witcover and the actors-singers wanted to get away from it for a while. The fact that Frank Corsaro, who had seen the experiment at the Actors Studio, directed a highly successful production of La Traviata at the City Center Opera in the fall of 1966 may have had something to do with Witcover's subsequent resentment and temporary abandonment of the piece.

Following the La Traviata experiment, he embarked on a production of Sheridan's The Rivals for the Directors Unit of the Actors Studio late in 1967. The stimulus for

8. From an interview with Richard Moss, November 12, 1978.

The Rivals was a trip to Bath, England that Witcover took in 1950. At Bath, he was struck by the vertical design of the city, its hills, streets, buildings; the town seemed to have grown up on top of itself rather than spreading out on a horizontal plane.

The production was cast with members of the Actors Studio in lead parts. Shirley Knight played Lydia Languish, Salome Jens was Julia, Clifford David was Captain Absolute, Fred Stewart was Sir Anthony Absolute, James Patterson was Faulkland, Will Hare was Bob Acres, and Ruth White (not a member of the Studio) played Mrs. Malaprop. Richard Moss stage managed the production, as he had La Traviata, and the other cast members were chosen from Witcover's classes.⁹

From the \$750.00 budgeted for the production, stairs and platforms were built in the structure of the auditorium of the Actors Studio, against inner walls of the building which helped to create the vertical illusion Witcover was seeking. As the building was classic in design, the period in which The Rivals takes place was effectively suggested.

Although the play was set in its own time, many interesting innovations were added. A prologue was created setting the action at 5:00 a.m., and Captain Absolute was seen getting into his coach and traveling to

9. From an interview with Walt Witcover, December 10, 1978.

Bath. Music and rear screen projections were used to create a cinematic effect of his trip.

Only the first two and one-half acts were developed. The object of the work was to explore if classic material could be approached in an organic, "method" way. Witcover had chosen intelligent actors who were capable of dealing with material that was not contemporary, and executing it in a manner that had great reality, but could not be called literal. The work was presented at the Actors Studio in 1967. The members of the Directors Unit and Lee Strasberg were stimulated because this also helped break down the belief by many that the "method," as developed by the Actors Studio, lent itself only to contemporary American material. Here was a production of The Rivals done with style in which the work was supported organically and created its own reality; which was in classic style and true to the material. There was one negative criticism, however. Strasberg felt that both Salome Jens and Shirley Knight were too old for their parts. Witcover had been thinking of casting them in this production for five years, and when they finally played the roles, they were beyond the age range of the characters they portrayed.

The Rivals was important to Witcover because it supported his conviction that classical material could be made more contemporarily dynamic by using this approach.

It also created an enthusiasm among his students and some of the members of the Actors Studio who had worked in The Rivals which would eventually lead to the formation of the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre.¹⁰

Encouraged, and with new energy, Witcover and the group again turned their attention to La Traviata. In 1967, Act II was developed with Gabriele again playing Violetta; David Cryer who had originally played Alfredo was not available and the role was filled by Ronald Young. The rehearsals lasted through the fall, and Act II was presented at the Actors Studio in the winter. Its success was even greater than that of Act I, and in May 1968, Act I and Act II were presented together for another series of "Special Evenings" for invited guests at the Studio. The program was called, "An Experiment in Theatrical Opera." Witcover was the director, Tom Nichols served as musical director, James A. Taylor was the production designer, Anthony Quintavella and Lee Marsh were lighting designers, Marie deLena did costumes, Buck Heller was the choreographer, and Richard Moss was the producer.¹¹

As the project grew during 1967, it was no longer practical to rehearse at the Actors Studio and in the homes of individuals. The Sloane House YMCA (34th Street)

10. Ibid.

11. The La Traviata program, the Actors Studio, May 1968, on file at the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre, 40 West 22 St., New York, N.Y.

gave the group an open space (a gymnasium) to work in without charge. The administration of Sloane House wished to expand its cultural projects; in exchange, the group opened rehearsals to members of the Sloane House and eventually absorbed some people who were interested in theatre into the production. This arrangement proved to be mutually beneficial, and helped keep costs down. During January 1968, at the YMCA, the group gave five more performances of Act II for invited audiences of friends and interested theatre and opera professionals. At this point, the funding for these productions came from Gabriele, Witcover, and Moss, as well as a few generous friends.

CHAPTER VI
LA TRAVIATA AT THE ACTORS STUDIO

La Traviata Act I

As we have seen, the La Traviata experiment began when Leyna Gabriele took the aria "E Forse' Lui" to class as an exercise. Witcover analyzed the inner actions of the aria and helped Gabriele explore what is inwardly happening to the character, Violetta, during the aria.

Initially, Witcover wanted to bring only this aria to the Actors Studio Directors Unit Workshop, but ultimately he decided to do the duet (between Violetta and Alfredo) leading up to it, and the cabaletta, "Sempre Libera," after it. "Sempre Libera" ends Act I of La Traviata. As there is a chorus between the duet and the aria, that, too, was added.

Witcover and Gabriele auditioned tenors for the part of Alfredo. David Cryer was selected from an open call. Ron Young who was studying acting with Witcover was the second choice. (The second time Act I was done at the Actors Studio in 1968, Young played Alfredo, and he was the only Alfredo who did all four acts). Cryer was trained as a singer, but not in the classics; also, he was not a trained actor. On the other hand, Young was a trained

dancer, singer, and actor. The chorus was made up of actors from Witcover's classes. Tom Nichols was the musical director and taught the actors in the chorus to sing. Gabriele and Witcover debated whether to do the production in English or Italian. They felt the existing English translations were poor, and at first, they decided to perform it in Italian. However, they translated Act I line by line into English as a point of reference so that the actors' "inner score" could be realized in English. This new translation became the text they performed in English. At first, work began at the apartments of either Witcover or Gabriele. Parties were given at Gabriele's apartment as part of the rehearsal process--as Act I is set in the apartment of Violetta where a party is in progress. The set ultimately was a reconstruction of Gabriele's apartment. It was decided that Gabriele would play Violetta as a contemporary "high class call girl."

The improvised parties so stimulated the cast that they persuaded Witcover to stage the whole first act. He researched the material and sought clues in the Dumas films novel and play, as well as listening to the Verdi music for months. For homework, each member of the chorus and cast had to create in his mind his day and life prior to the party-rehearsal. These party-rehearsals were ultimately moved from Gabriele's apartment to the Actors Studio where Act I of La Traviata was to be performed.

Members of the chorus were instructed to arrive at different times to rehearsal, much as they would arrive at a party in real life. At one party, Gabriele said she felt ill. This has been pre-arranged with Witcover to simulate and improvise the event as it takes place in the opera. The cast had not been advised that it was an improvisation and reactions developed from that rehearsal which were later used in the performances.

At one particular party, games such as charades were introduced. These competitive games led to unpredictable relationships among the cast members. Richard Moss who became the stage manager for the project became the Major Domo of the party, in Gabriele's employ. At first, Gabriele resisted this approach. When it was suggested that the party was a group of "jet-set" people, and that, as Violetta, she often gave orgies at her house, she rejected the concept. She says:

Later I realized the soundness of this. Violetta as a contemporary would be a member of the jet-set. She might give pop art parties--she was a part of the world of "La Dolce Vita."¹

These experimental party-rehearsals led Witcover and the company to do Act I in contemporary dress for two reasons: (1) for the budget--there was no money for costumes, (2) to eliminate difficulties that might ensue if

1. From an interview with Leyna Gabriele, October 2, 1978.

the actors were obliged to perform a period piece. The rationalization was that La Traviata was the first modern opera to be performed in contemporary dress when it was first performed.

By repeatedly listening to the score, both Witcover and Gabriele discovered clues which aided the staging of the piece. Witcover attempted, as he explained:

To create in space what the music was saying in time. For example, at the end of the act, the guests are leaving; normally, it is played as if they are spent and tired, yet the music is suddenly gay and upbeat. It occurred to us that these guests were just going home to shower and refresh themselves before going on to other parties that night. So we played that beat differently. Usually, I waited for the actors to discover these things for themselves. I tried not to impose any choices on them.²

La Traviata Act II

At first, Witcover resisted staging Act II when Lee Strasberg asked him to. He says:

In part I was hurt because I felt rightly or wrongly that Frank Corsaro had used some of my ideas in his now famous production. But the real reason was that Act II posed too many problems. It is badly constructed from the point of view of the libretto. Too much happens in fifty minutes' time. There are many major dramatic reversals in the act which always has been played as if only fifty minutes in a lifetime go by. But then it occurred to me that if I could find a way of stretching that time over the period of a day, it might work. Lee Strasberg always talked about the "life of a day,"

2. From an interview with Walt Witcover, December 10, 1978.

which actors have to create in the "inner score." I re-read the novel, the play, and again listened to the music for clues to create a logical stream of events that would justify all the reversals in the libretto. I also discovered that traditionally many cuts are made in the music. I felt Verdi put them there for some reason. Leyna agreed with me and we decided to perform everything--every cabaletta--every note.³

One of the first tasks Witcover faced was to find an actor to play Germont, Alfredo's father. Finally he found Adair McGowen who was a lyric baritone, tall and stalwart in stature. Witcover said:

However, Mr. McGowen was a very stiff, rigid actor who tended to intellectualize and did not trust his impulses. I used this stiffness to our mutual advantage. He became a military man, a Brigadier General, from the South. When I was in the army, I met many men like him. This also made his reactions to the situation in the text reasonable. In the opera he is against his son's relationship with Violetta mainly because the scandal is endangering his daughter's future marriage.⁴

For the second production of La Traviata, Ron Young played Alfredo in Act I with the staging for the first production. But for Act II, III, and IV, he created his own Alfredo. As Young had grown up around water, and is a skilled water skier, fisherman, and swimmer, it was decided that the idyllic retreat of Alfredo and Violetta would be a house on a lake. Traditionally it was a country home and Alfredo enters in Act II with a hunting gun.

For the production, a house on an island in Candle-

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

wood Lake, Connecticut was copied on stage. Some movie footage showed Young water-skiing while his man-servant Joseph, played by Bob Coleman, drove the boat. This sequence offered close-ups of Alfredo and flashbacks of Violetta who was constantly on his mind. Alfredo finally comes to shore and jumps out of his water skis as the music begins. As the film ends, Young appears in person on the stage in his dripping bathing suit and deposits his water skis. There is a recitative with Joseph, and then an aria. During his aria, "De Meie Bollenti Spiriti," Alfredo fixes breakfast for Violetta. As he squeezes oranges and makes toast and coffee, he sings to Joseph who is aiding him. The two men ascend the stairs with Violetta's breakfast tray. At this point, a cabaletta which was normally excluded was restored. Once in the bedroom, Joseph leaves, as Alfredo gets into bed with Violetta. A blackout to suggest the passing of an hour was used in the production at this point.

Witcover stated:

Neither the play nor the opera show any sexual contact between the two. This sequence leading to a blackout allowed me to do so and also create the feeling of time passing.⁵

After the blackout, it is late morning. Alfredo sunbathes on the patio while Violetta is upstairs taking a bath. The maid, Annina, played by Theresa Merritte, enters and Alfredo learns that she has been to New York City to

5. Ibid.

sell some of Violetta's jewelry. The "O Mio Remorso" cabaletta was also restored. Alfredo sings it as he dresses and then prepares to go to the city to get the money they need--as Violetta descends to get garden tools and goes into the garden.

Thus, the "flow of the day" was established on stage. While Violetta is gardening, Germont enters. He introduces himself to Violetta. Witcover gave Adair McGowen a hand prop, a briefcase, to make him more at ease. It was rationalized that it contained the dossiers and papers used in his work. During the exchange, Violetta realizes she needs something from the garden shed which is locked and she goes to her bedroom to get the key. Germont follows her, brushing past the maid. Once inside the bedroom, separated from her by the unmade bed where Violetta and Alfredo have made love earlier, he continues to ask her to separate from Alfredo. From his briefcase, he takes a "scandal sheet," The New York Enquirer which has an article about Violetta, the "party girl," and Alfredo, the son of a Brigadier General. It is this scandal which has reached back home, down South, and endangered his daughter's engagement.

Playing this scene in the bedroom over the bed where Violetta and Alfredo have earlier made love added to the drama. The fact that Leyna Gabriele as Violetta was a bit older than Ron Young as Alfredo, and a bit younger than

Adair McGowen as Germont added new suggestiveness to the text. The father played ambivalent feelings, the possible physical attraction he felt for Violetta. In another beat, Germont forces her to look into the mirror on her dressing table. He points out that she is older than Alfredo and forces her to look at the future when she will no longer be attractive to him. To escape this, she descends the stairs to the kitchen, ostensibly to fetch some iced tea. Germont follows her and accepts the iced tea. For a moment, their relationship seems friendlier. She asks him if he just wants her to let the relationship sober down temporarily to keep it out of the newspapers. He says no, and continues to insist that she leave Alfredo. A physical struggle ensues and in the process the iced tea pitcher falls to the floor. This was done because the next aria of Violetta's is a pleading one. Traditionally, singers have done it on their knees, an attitude which seemed contrived and false to Witcover. But here, to justify her being on her knees during the aria, Violetta is picking up the pieces of the broken pitcher. Germont persuades her to give up Alfredo, and she agrees. Finally, Germont exits, but one had the sense that these actions had taken place during part of the afternoon.

As the whole house was on the stage at the same time, Alfredo and Joseph are next discovered downstairs on the patio. They have returned, and Alfredo has apparently

solved his financial problems for the moment. In his joy, he is preparing a party, with a bottle of champagne. It is late afternoon, and a summer storm is approaching. During his absence, however, Violetta has given the note she has written to Alfredo to a neighbor--a child who is visiting the maid. The child brings the note to Alfredo.

This leads to the last sequence in the act. Witcover tried to create a life in space--the outward manifestations that would show the great drama of this scene. He said, "When there is a big musical event, you must create a big dramatic event to justify it."⁶

Germont and Alfredo have a discussion which leads to a squabble. During this, Alfredo flees to the patio, leaping over a piece of garden furniture on his way, falls, and is injured. Germont is obliged to carry his son back and give him first aid. Here, "Di Provenza" is sung, and during the last cabaletta, Germont helps his son pack his bags.

By creating a flow of the day and justifying the rapid changes in the text, Witcover made Act II seem less contrived. The restoration of the cabalettas that usually are not performed allowed the action to flow more logically. By creating a house on the stage and breaking down the rigid unity of place, Witcover allowed the action of the scene to

6. Ibid.

flow. Traditionally, the scene takes place in the garden of Violetta's and Alfredo's idyllic retreat. Using the actors' own personal qualities and giving them activities for every moment on the stage also helped to free them.

Young said:

Every action and activity was set to music. There is freedom in that and surprisingly it doesn't get stale--that is, if you have created an "inner life" that will support the outer activities. I remember the act closed as I was packing. I re-read Violetta's letter. I was moved but I had to deal with packing my bags at the same time. For me as an actor, it heightened the reality. I must say, as an actor, I really was open to working this way and I am trained as a dancer, singer, and actor and can move and sing at the same time. I don't know if other singers can do that. It takes a lot of training.⁷

The series of demonstrations at the Actors Studio in May, 1968 were generally well received. Speight Jenkins, Jr. wrote in an article entitled "Method Verdi" in The Opera News:

. . . their intensity of feeling and their entirely fresh ideas can give experienced singers a way to make repertory Traviatas more meaningful . . . The Actors Studio version of the first act, first performed in the spring of 1966, clearly influenced Frank Corsaro's now famous New York City Opera production. The second act was then presented in December 1967; the two acts were shown together late last spring . . . Their success might send waves through the world of opera.⁸

Albert Bermel in The New Leader was positive but

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7. From an interview with Ronald E. Young, December 11, 1978.
 8. Speight Jenkins, Jr., "Method Verdi," The Opera News, December 7, 1968, p. 24.

cautionary. He wrote:

Certainly the two acts of the opera shown that night provided a workout for the eyeballs. Witcover's technique of "clearly expressing" is unabashedly Method; he has filled in dozens of secondary motives, drawing on the subtext of the libretto to account for every emotional transposition in the score.

Witcover is intent on unveiling its psychological meaning by explaining its drama; sometimes this means making explicit and plain what was previously implicit and plain. He has also updated the setting, so that the plot is not timeless but acceptably contemporary.

What gives his technique its freshness is the quality and sincerity of the acting. Leyna Gabriele as Violetta, Ronald Young as Alfredo, and Adair McGowen as Germont behave as though knowing what to do at any given moment.

. . . But acting tasks have a way of turning into fussy activity. Witcover occasionally gives his singers more busy work than they need. The party at Violetta's is a din of gasps, popping balloons and champagne corks. During "Di quell'amor," Violetta's "Shtick" is practically a fiddle-shtick. She laboriously picks at the wrappings of a gift packaging Alfredo has handed her, and it turns out to be a book-- a suitable offering from a student, even mad with desire, but a spectator is apt to wonder what the title is. The Kama Sutra? How To Get By With TB? Later he wonders what purpose the book was put to--did it mean that Violetta ought to spend more time reading and less on the job?-- and he realizes that he missed the aria.

And when Germont comes back to find Alfredo reading the dear John letter from Violetta, he slaps him; Alfredo dives over a fence and hurts himself, is carried indoors and babied back to consciousness by his dad. At this point, McGowen is singing "Di Provenza il mar" in a superb baritone, and one is tempted to shout, "Stop bathing his face and let's listen to the damn music."

. . . The impressions left by the director on this opera are, in sum, very close to those we might expect on a comparable play. Realistic

directing helps realistic plays but doesn't do much for a poetic or elusive drama except reduce it.⁹

In another review for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Speight Jenkins, Jr. declared:

In the second act, even more genius was shown. Has anyone ever seen a Germont who didn't just stand and sing, "Di Provenza" to an unlistening Alfredo? In this production, "Di Provenza" made much more effect than usual. Verdi's rich and melodious music gained from the activity. The audience heard and watched, for the first time, seeing "Di Provenza" as Verdi must have.

. . . Witcover's accomplishment made a standard opera as intense as any Off-Broadway play and might well be a way to enrich opera in the future.¹⁰

La Traviata Act III

In the summer of 1968, Witcover and the group continued their work on La Traviata for the Directors Workshop of the Actors Studio.

Act III of the opera presented some difficulties. In reality, Verdi meant it to be Scene 2 of Act II--coming as it does, later in the same day as Act II. Traditionally, however, it is performed as a separate act. It is divided into three parts: (1) a Divertissement--a ballet which was an opera convention of the time. This ballet takes place at Flora's party and there is no action to

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9. Albert Bermel, "On Stage: Verdi as Dramatist," The New Leader, June 17, 1968, pp. 33-34.
10. Speight Jenkins, Jr., "Method Opera Puts Alfredo In Swimsuit," the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Sunday, September 29, 1968, p. 5C.

justify it and make it logical and acceptable to a modern audience; (2) the Dramatic Scene--a confrontation between Alfredo and Violetta. This gambling scene is well constructed but the moment of crisis where Alfredo throws money at Violetta's feet and calls her a whore, while scandalous to a 19th century audience, had to be reworked to create a similarly shocking impact for a contemporary audience; (3) the Concertante--another convention where all the characters of the piece line up at the edge of the stage and sing out their innermost thoughts. This also would be hard for a modern audience to accept unless a new logic was found to support these extravagant actions on the stage.

A situation had to be created that would make the ballet seem a natural event. It was decided that Flora had rented an estate in Southampton; that she was a jet-set hostess who often competed with Violetta by trying to give parties even more extravagant than Violetta's. Her guests, who had come for the summer weekend, were told to bring costumes. Gaston, a friend of Flora's, had arranged a kind of "amateur night" among the guests. Along with the games of chance that Flora provided, the guests would play other games like charades. This logic enabled Witcover and the performers to justify the Divertissement and make it appear to arise from the dramatic situation.

The text and music at this point tell of the women as fortune tellers and the men as heroic toreadors. As fortune telling was in vogue in 1968, that was not hard to deal with; the women all became fortune tellers. But heroic toreadors were not a part of the American culture in 1968. They were changed into "rock" singers. The lead singer of the group corresponded to the heroic toreador of the traditional presentation of the opera. He became a "rock" idol in this version and made his entrance on a motor scooter. The carnival party thus created enabled the action to move forward in a progression acceptable to an audience in 1968.

Following this same logic, and working backwards, the Concertante at the end could only be justified for both the audience and the performers if it were done as a mockery. The music is so extravagant that it is hard to take it seriously in our time unless it is done as if the performers are camping and appear to be playing these games. Over the months of rehearsal some ingenious actions were found to fill the gaps in credibility. Along with the games of chance and roulette wheels set up for Flora's party, a cage was hung for a go-go dancer to perform in. The winners of the games were given silly gifts like stuffed toys. One such toy, a large monkey, which Flora gave to Gaston as a prize for organizing the entertainment, was to play an important part in the action.

Part Two, the confrontation scene between Alfredo and Violetta, was made as shocking to modern spectators as it had been in the 19th century. Obviously, Alfredo throwing money at Violetta's feet and calling her a whore would seem tame today. In this version, after their confrontation duet, he throws her into the go-go cage; as they fight, he puts an ugly blond wig on her head, smears her make-up, puts the money into the mouth of the stuffed monkey and thrusts it between her legs. He then hoists the go-go cage high into the air. Of course, the guests all believe this is another charade. However, the cage becomes caught in the air. During the third part of the act--the Concertante--Violetta is suspended in the cage as a group of men try to get it down. A winch and pulley system was constructed so that the cage could be dropped a few inches according to the flourishes in the music during the Concertante. These innovations were arrived at by the whole company, not the director alone, during the months of exploration.¹¹

Often the actors themselves were inventive. For example, in the opera, Alfredo makes his first entrance in Act II after the Divertissement. Usually he does so against extravagant flourishes in the music. Ron Young devised a bit of business which worked with the music to

11. From an interview with Walt Witcover, December 17, 1978, and the prompt book.

create an overwhelming impact. Along with the hanging go-go cage and games of chance, there was a trapeze-like swing hanging. The theatre space at the Actors Studio was set up with the actors making their entrances from the balcony which surrounds the theatre floor. This balcony represented the main level of Flora's house in Southampton while the lower level of the playing space represented the back lawn. (It was rationalized that the house was constructed on a large dune--with the driveway and main level higher than the lawn in the rear.) The actors made their entrances down a large circular staircase. Young, as Alfredo, however, made his entrance on the trapeze--singing the first bars of his music while swinging in the air.¹² This feat matched the extravagance of the music, gave the florid music a justification and linked it to the activity on the stage. Act III was performed only once--at the Directors Unit of the Actors Studio.

La Traviata Act IV

During their work on Act III, the group also worked on Act IV of La Traviata. Like Act III, it was performed only once at the Directors Unit of the Actors Studio--one month after the presentation of Act III.

12. Ronald E. Young, interview.

Witcover remembered that Lee Strasberg considered the work on Act IV to be rather "external" compared to the other acts.

Act IV concentrates on Violetta's dying. It is rather well constructed but often becomes monotonous to a contemporary audience. Several innovations were tried. Traditionally, it takes place in Violetta's bedroom. In this production, her whole apartment was reconstructed on the stage as in Act I. The angle was changed, giving greater prominence to the bedroom and allowing for an area that represented the sidewalk outside her apartment, in order to bring onstage the life outside the apartment. It was felt that this public life, in contrast with the privacy of the events in her bedroom, would create greater irony. There are two distinct sections of music which traditionally suggest the outside world. Witcover used the music to present two different groups of people returning home on New Year's Day--one group representing the "high life," dressed as Park Avenue swells, and the other group representing the "low life," dressed as East Village hippies.

Act IV presented a challenge in that it began with a plaintive Prelude that echoed the opening music of Act I. This was justified as Violetta's retiring to bed and reminiscing about her relationship as she goes to sleep on New Year's Eve. The clue to this idea is the Dumas

film novel which starts out as she is dying and flashes back to the story of the two lovers.

After a long blackout, the act proper begins. It is one year and one week after Violetta and Alfredo have met at her party. Violetta lies dying, but in the streets outside, life goes on. Violetta sends Annina out to give some money to the poor-looking "hippies." Seated in her living room is a bailiff with a gun. Two bailiffs have taken turns watching the furniture for days; they represent her creditors. She has been evicted and her creditors have placed liens on her possessions.

Outside, Annina becomes involved with the chorus (the hippies) and she runs into Alfredo, dressed as a seaman. His being in uniform justified his absence and his not receiving word from his father sooner, explaining the real reason Violetta has left him.

Alfredo arrives, now knowing the truth. He is prepared to marry Violetta. He gives her a ring and she makes a ring for him out of the ribbon in her hair. They start to pack and she has an attack. She sings her aria, taking to task God and the fates. She is furious that she has to die. Germont, the father, arrives with his now happily married daughter and new son-in-law (an addition to this production). They arrive as Violetta is running down the stairs in delirious fury. Alfredo carries her up to the bedroom as he sings his accusations to his

father. Annina arrives with a doctor. Because death arias may seem implausible to modern audiences who find it hard to believe a character can sing extravagant music while dying, the following dramatic logic was created. The doctor administered aid, such as injections and medicine to Violetta in coordination with the music, so that her moments of vocal outburst seemed possible under the circumstances. Here, the pain also led her to great bursts of singing at moments.

Alfredo was played as a very romantic character who responded to momentary feelings. He is so overcome at her death that he takes the gun from the bailiff. Germont and Alfredo struggle, but to no avail, for Alfredo shoots himself to the final outburst of music.

While all the material cannot be modernized in this way, Witcover feels that all material lends itself to re-examination. He states:

Everything in theatre was written to be played for human beings and shown to human beings. While I can't approach every opera in the same way, a viable externalization of the inner soul of any musical work is possible. It is our task to find an inner logic that can be expressed in action and played in space in a way that is believable to an audience today.¹³

13. From an interview with Walt Witcover, December 17, 1978.

CHAPTER VII

THE HISTORY OF MASTERWORKS LABORATORY THEATRE: SPRING 1968 - PRESENT

The Formation and Goals of Masterworks Laboratory Theatre

Offers of monetary support for a Broadway production of an up-to-date La Traviata followed the experiment at the Actors Studio. But Gabriele, Moss, and Witcover had already made a philosophical choice. They would rather start a theatre laboratory where their approach to opera and the classics could continue. Lee Strasberg and Cheryl Crawford were most encouraging, as were other members of the Actors Studio. However, many of the people who offered monetary backing for a Broadway production of La Traviata which they thought had good chances for financial success, were not interested in funding a group with goals that were primarily experimental and non-commercial.

On April 5, 1968, Gabriele, Moss, and Witcover signed a Certificate of Incorporation which formed a non-profit organization called Masterworks Theatre, Inc., chartered by the State of New York. The purpose of this

theatre was:

To cultivate, promote, foster, sponsor and develop among its members the appreciation, understanding, taste, and love of the Dramatic and Musical Arts; to create a theatrical centre and a repertory company for the advancement of such purposes; to secure the interest of patrons for these arts; to foster the development in the community of an appreciation of the Dramatic and Musical Arts by promoting, producing and staging theatrical and musical productions and entertainments; to do any and all lawful things necessary, suitable and proper for the accomplishment of these purposes; all of which purposes shall be for no pecuniary gain.¹

Walt Witcover was named Artistic Director; Richard Moss, Executive Producer; and Leyna Gabriele, Supervising Artist. The original organization limited the number of directors to three. Initially, the Advisory Board had as its members Eric Bentley, playwright and critic; Mimi Benzell, opera singer; Herbert Berghof, director and actor; Harold Clurman, director and critic; Frank Guarrera of the Metropolitan Opera; Laszlo Halasz, conductor and founder of The City Opera; June Havoc, actress and author; Paul B. Pettit, Professor of Theatre at SUNY, Albany; and Ruth White, actress. (Salome Jens, actress, joined the Board in 1969). However, members of the Advisory Board were asked to offer little advice. This is not unusual in such cases. Ultimately, beyond

1. Certificate of Incorporation of Masterworks Theatre, Inc., April 5, 1968, p. 1. On file at the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre office, 40 West 22nd St., New York, N.Y.

helping to raise money and supplying translations to Witcover, these names have only been dressing for the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre letterhead.

Later, on June 3, 1970, the By-Laws of the organization were changed, allowing it to have a Board of Directors. At this time, the name of the corporation was changed to Masterworks Laboratory Theatre, Inc., which they felt was a more accurate description of the work and philosophy of the organization. A sustaining committee composed of Juliette T. Benton, Mrs. Adair McGowen, Elizabeth Pritchett, and Mrs. Margot B. Wilson was also formed.

Masterworks Theatre, Inc. was set up as a theatrical laboratory by and for professional artists and technicians. Its purpose was to explore and develop fresh approaches to the staging of classic plays and operas and to reach new audiences for these works. The philosophy at the base of the work was the "method" of training actors and singers and staging works. It was hoped that this organic approach as developed from the Stanislavski system by contemporary American teachers like Curt Conway, Herbert Berghof, Lee Strasberg, and Walt Witcover would help directors and performers explore fresh procedures and vivid stage forms, thereby releasing new spirit in the production of classic dramatic and musical

works in order to make these works viable and accessible to modern audiences. Theatre professionals, trying to escape from standard traditional theatre would be able to experiment. The Masterworks Laboratory Theatre would be a home for these professionals as well as a laboratory and school--the basic idea being that theatre artists, no matter how professional, must continue their development and training constantly in an atmosphere conducive to exploration and growth, and without the pressures of succeeding in a commercial sense. Masterworks Laboratory Theatre was not created to nurture failure, but it was created to allow for innovation which in the commercial theatre often is not permissible. The rehearsals and production procedures were to be always probative and not doctrinaire, while remaining faithful to the author's and composer's intentions; the full potential of modern acting, directing, and production techniques would be exploited to create living performances of their works.

Initially the goals were: (1) to complete work on the La Traviata project, (2) to train singers in acting, (3) to develop new audiences for opera, (4) to explore a classic play.

(1) Masterworks Laboratory Theatre would endeavor to create real characters behaving credibly and coherently in a stage action that was firmly wedded to the music and expressed the continuous flow of the drama, thereby in-

volving the spectator in a dynamic musical-dramatic event. The initial plan was to complete experimental work on the La Traviata project with the necessary time it needed and to ultimately offer public performances of a full production of the opera.

(2) Masterworks Laboratory Theatre planned to set up a formal program to train singers in modern acting techniques at the professional level, in much the same way that Stanislavski had worked with the Studio Opera of the Bolshoi. Masterworks Laboratory Theatre recognized that without the necessary skills, actors-singers would never be able to work in an organic way. Ideas could be imposed by a director on a performer, as often was the case in the productions of Felsenstein and Wieland Wagner, but without the organic execution of these ideas, the performer is often providing form without content.

(3) Based on the test performances of Act II of La Traviata at Sloane House YMCA in January 1968, a plan for a special program of audience development was undertaken. Many members of the audience at the YMCA had never seen an opera before and had been surprised and pleased to find themselves actually enjoying the experience. The aim of Masterworks Laboratory Theatre was to extend the appreciation of opera to those culturally deprived sectors of the urban community for whom opera, as it is conventionally staged and produced, was historically an irrele-

vant experience. It was hoped that the future full production of La Traviata could be brought into some of the underprivileged neighborhoods of New York to be seen and heard as live and exciting theatre rather than as an exercise in education. The goal was to reach both youngsters and adults who always had assumed that opera was not for them, and to change these attitudes.

(4) As Masterworks Laboratory Theatre would ultimately maintain a repertory of both lyric and spoken drama, experimental work on a classic play would begin during the summer of 1969, with a full public production of the play early in the 1969-1970 season. Naturally, the approach to the play would be in keeping with the theatrical philosophy of Masterworks Laboratory Theatre.

The First Benefit

In order to raise funds for Masterworks Theatre to continue their work which included the continuation of the La Traviata experiment, a benefit luncheon was held on March 27, 1969 at the Chez Vito Restaurant. Friends of the group contributed either money or their talents. The entertainment was provided by Nancy Andrews, Jerry Stiller, and Anne Meara, with Stephen Strimpell as Master of Ceremonies. June Havoc and Salome Jens served as Hostesses. The donation amounted to \$20.00 per person, and Masterworks Theatre was able to raise \$2,370.00 with

expenditures of \$793.00, a net gain of \$1,577.00. Invitations were sent to a select group of friends and potential contributors. This established a technique of fund raising which was to be used many times in the future.

By the end of 1968, the group was outgrowing the facilities of the Actors Studio and Sloane House YMCA, and larger quarters were sought where the group would have a true home.

The Courthouse

An old, unused red brick New York City Courthouse and former jail on Second Avenue and 2nd Street was acquired. Moss described it as neo-classic and Italianate in style.² Through friends, Gabriele had heard about the building which was in the hands of the Real Estate Department of the City of New York. The municipality was not using it, and had set a precedent by allowing various theatre groups, like the "Bread and Puppet Theatre," to use the space. However, the group that had been using it at the time was careless, and their operation was alienating people in the neighborhood. Richard Moss convinced the Commissioner of Real Estate, Ira Duchan, to let Masterworks Laboratory Theatre have the space. Deputy Commissioner Goldner allowed the group to rehearse there,

2. All information about the Courthouse and its acquisition is from interviews with Walt Witcover, November 11, 1978, and Richard Moss on November 12, 1978.

and dropped in on a rehearsal. He was sufficiently impressed by the conduct as well as the work of the group to allow it to continue there. There was no formal agreement nor charge for the space. However, the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre assumed responsibility for some of the unpaid utility bills that the other group had incurred, and the arrangement worked out well until the City sold the building in late 1971.

The basement had contained a prison with cells for prisoners awaiting trial. On the main floor, in what had been the old courtroom, the group found a large open space which was approximately 2,400 feet square (one wall 80 ft. and the other 40 ft.) with thick walls built in a solid, classic manner. The large windows faced north and east. The ceilings were 22 feet high. This room was fashioned into a playing space painted purple-indigo. James Taylor, a T.V. designer working with the group, obtained platforms from the studios he was working with. Lindy's Restaurant was going out of business, and the group bought chairs for the audience. The judge's bench remained.

In December 1969, the group took over the Court-house. The main courtroom was cleaned, restored, and transformed by the voluntary labor of friends. Lumber, paint, the platforms, and electrical installations were all contributed and installed by those interested in aiding the project. The space was called the "Theatre-in-the-Court-

house."

In January 1970, the renovations were finished and preliminary work commenced on Ibsen's A Doll's House, with Barbara Barrie as Nora. This project was discontinued because Barrie was called away for work on a theatrical project for which she was paid.

February was devoted to rehearsals and preparation for Experiments in Lyric Theatre which was performed in March and April.

The first Board of Directors meeting was held on June 3, 1970, at which time the name of the group was officially amended to Masterworks Laboratory Theatre and the new administration was established as follows:

Walt Witcover	ADVISORY BOARD
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR	Eric Bentley
	Herbert Berghof
Richard Moss	Albert Bermel
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER	Harold Clurman
	Howard da Silva
BOARD OF DIRECTORS	Frank Guarrera
Rollin P. Baldwin	Laszlo Halasz
Roy F. Barnitt	June Havoc
Juliette T. Benton	Salome Jens
Leyna Gabriele	Paul B. Pettit
Marvin Green	
Jay Harnick	Priscilla Alexander
Benjamin Horn	ADMINISTRATOR
Richard J. Hughes	
Mrs. F.H. LaGuardia	Farber & Siff
Alvin Silverman	COUNSEL
Jerry Stiller	
Jerry Zucker	

The group continued to function at the Courthouse.

The following is a list of productions presented there:

March, 1970, Experiments in Lyric Theatre:
A program built of scenes from operas,
directed by Walt Witcover.

June, 1970, Antigone: Jean Anouilh, directed
by Richard Moss.

August, 1970, Three Plays of the Sea: Eugene
O'Neill (Moon of the Caribbees, Bound East
for Cardiff, and In the Zone), directed by
Nyla Lyon.

March, 1971, From the World of Young Chekhov:
Anton Chekhov (The Boor and seven short
stories), directed by Walt Witcover.

June, 1971, Boubouroche: Georges Courteline,
English version by Albert Bermel, directed
by Walt Witcover.

September, 1971, Miss Julie: August Strindberg,
directed by John Kwitkor.

Late in 1971, the City of New York auctioned off
the Courthouse. The Madison Avenue Baptist Church, 30
East 31st Street, was rented for the next production.

February, 1972, The Marriage: Nikolai Gogol,
English version by Eric Bentley, directed
by Walt Witcover.

Two months later the next production was presented
at Lolly's Yacht Club on Lexington Avenue, which was also
rented.

May, 1972, Lyric Theatre 1972: (experimental
scenes from opera and musical theatre),
directed by Walt Witcover.

In the fall of 1972, Masterworks Laboratory
Theatre acquired a home where it was to remain for five
years: the Spencer Memorial Church in Brooklyn Heights.
The following is a list of productions at the church.

December, 1972, Danton's Death: Georg Büchner, directed by Terry Walker.

February, 1973, A Serving of Verse: (a program built of English and American prose and folk songs) created by the performers and directed by Walt Witcover.

April, 1973, Two One-Act Plays: George Bernard Shaw (The Man of Destiny directed by Stanley Brechner and Press Cuttings directed by Terry Walker).

May, 1973, Mozart As Dramatist: (arias and musical pieces by Mozart integrated into a whole entertainment) directed by Walt Witcover.

April, 1974, Salon-Comédie: Alfred de Musset, English version by Mary Helena Day (A Door Must Be Either Open or Shut and You Cannot Think of Everything), directed by Walt Witcover.

May, 1974, Bravo Bureaucracy: Georges Courteline, English translation by Albert Bermel. (Five short plays, Badin the Bold and Peace at Home directed by Terry Walker; Hold On Hortense and The Registered Letter directed by Ted Forlow and The Commissioner Has a Kind Heart directed by Stanley Brechner.

June, 1974, Lovelives: (a staging of song cycles) conceived and directed by Walt Witcover.

December, 1974, The Doctor In Spite of Himself: Molière, English version by Lady Gregory, directed by Terry Walker.

February, 1975, God of Vengeance: Scholem Asch, English version by Isaac J. Goldberg, directed by Stanley Brechner.

October, 1975, The Gondoliers: Gilbert and Sullivan, directed by Walt Witcover.

June, 1976, Lessons In Love: (a program composed of eight love scenes from Love for Love by Congreve, The Beaux Stratagem, Farquhar; The Provoked Wife, Vanbrugh; Afraid to Fight, Courteline; La Ronde, Schnitzler; The Taming of the Shrew, Shakespeare; The Rivals and The School for Scandal, Sheridan), directed by Don

Marlette, Gayle Swymer, Terry Walker, and Walt Witcover.

November, 1976, West of Galway: Lady Gregory (three short plays, The Rising of the Moon directed by Don Marlette; Hyacinth Halvey and The Gaol Gate directed by Walt Witcover).

May, 1977, Mozart and Molière: (Mozart's Bastien and Bastienne directed by Leyna Gabriele and Molière's The Forced Marriage directed by Walt Witcover, English translation by Albert Bermel.

Masterworks Laboratory Theatre is now housed at 40 West 22nd Street in New York where it still functions sporadically. There have been presentations for potential backers, but the only full-scale production has been:

May, 1980, The Goose From Cairo: Mozart, English version by Sheldon Harnick, directed by Leyna Gabriele.

PART IV

THE "METHOD" AS IMPLEMENTED BY WALT WITCOVER

CHAPTER VIII

THE MASTERWORKS LABORATORY THEATRE "PROCESS"

The Basic Philosophy

In my research, I discovered that Witcover was not always able to put into practice his teachings. As a director, he tries to elicit from the performer his own individual inner truth so that he (Witcover) can build on it and create a format around this truth. He appears to remain in the background during rehearsals, but in reality he strongly manipulates his actors, and in the final stages of rehearsal, he gets them to do what he wants them to do. Philosophically, he believes the presence of the director at rehearsals should be subtle so that the actors have the illusion of discovering stage business, their relationships to other characters, and their feelings of self. Ideally, for Witcover, the director's job would never be to block a play, but to be a guide, a guru, a psychologist, an arbitrator, a negotiator, a parent, or an older sibling. With this definition, it's no wonder that, as a man in the theatre, he was not always able to practice what he preached.

Witcover insists that he is more interested in the

process of putting on a play or opera than the results he and his followers achieve. After exploring this process with Witcover, one comes to the realization that it really follows in the tradition of Stanislavski, the Group Theatre, and finally, Lee Strasberg and the Actors Studio. Nothing that Witcover and his group did and still do is very unusual. They have not departed from the Stanislavski approach but have attempted truly to practice the preachings of the Russian master. As the rehearsal procedures of this approach demand so much time, Masterworks Laboratory Theatre has tried to provide the conditions and circumstances that would allow for this way of rehearsing material; an environment that would nurture the process and an atmosphere that would reduce pressure and tension and remain as relaxed as possible; where the chief thrust of the rehearsals would be exploration and experimentation. While a situation that provides time for much trial and error is a luxury in our contemporary theatre, it was taken for granted by Stanislavski in Russia. Brecht and Felsenstein also tried to create the same kind of environment for their work in Germany and often succeeded. When Witcover speaks of time, he means rehearsal periods that are spread out over months. This kind of relaxed schedule permits the room necessary for the growth and thought that occurs in the minds of the participants between rehearsals. In other words, one

hundred and twenty hours of rehearsal in three weeks are not as productive as the same number of hours spread out over six or eight weeks. Witcover's first experiment with La Traviata which took thirty-five minutes' playing time was rehearsed for six weeks. Five months of rehearsal went into Act II of the opera.

Witcover does not like the pressure of an opening date which, he feels, obliges the actors and director to work for results, rather than completely exploring the material. This, too, would be impossible in a commercial theatrical venture. Most often, Witcover begins rehearsals without a clear concept of the form the finished product will take, because he believes the form will come out of the collaborative work of all the participants: musicians, singers, actors, designer, costumer, and director. Feeling that the give and take of all concerned will lead to a more interesting result than that which emerges from the imposition of ideas by a director or producer, Witcover has attempted to follow a hazardous course. Often he has not been able to hold to his philosophy. It is also not difficult to understand the fears such an approach would present to a producer concerned with a balance sheet. Witcover has always needed, and is still in search of, a unique kind of individual capable of producing theatre under these conditions.

Witcover readily admits he has problems with

structuring rehearsal time, and it is because of this that he searches for texts and music that offer structure:

I look for scripts, stories, songs or poems that have clearly defined structure. That is why I like to work with music; musical theatre-- because the author-composer has usually written material in a strict shape that has already formalized the use of rhythm and tempo. Unless you completely disregard the work of the composer, the configuration of and use of time on the stage is already set for you. Having to adhere to this time frame forces me to have structure in my own work. To help myself, I always start with the material and not just an idea. However, my goal is to reveal in space (on a stage) the philosophy and truth inherent in the words and music and to let the logic of human behavior lead to the form, or in other words, let the content create the form of the final presentation. I need the structure of the text or music to guide me.¹

While the rehearsal procedure developed by Witcover is basically the same for all the productions, this same process led to a variety of results including unusual forms. The work of the group falls into three major categories: (1) classical plays; (2) operas; and (3) productions created from material not originally intended for dramatic presentation.

Classical Plays
(Non-Contemporary Plays)

Masterworks Laboratory Theatre has done a variety of material from the library of dramatic literature that

1. From an interview with Walt Witcover, May 20, 1981.

for one reason or another has continued to appeal to theatre practitioners and audiences over the years. The group has presented these plays in a way that is basically realistic, verbal, non-ritualistic, and conventional. (Conventional in that the actors are always used as people and not objects, and the text, for the most part, is the central focus of the theatrical experience). While there were some attempts to present pieces in a so-called "environmental" way, generally they were abortive. Witcover and the group have tended to follow the humanistic and realistic path of Stanislavski and later Vakhtangov. In the choice of material, Witcover, who admits he is a realist, has more than influenced his followers as the artistic director of Masterworks Laboratory Theatre. The choice of Verdi and Mozart adheres to his taste, for he regards them as superb craftsmen of the realistic school. Witcover and the group might attempt Strindberg's Miss Julie but his Dream Play is out of bounds. Witcover has never directed plays of the Absurd theatre; he feels this kind of material is so special and so private that it presents a view of the world he does not share, and his chosen method of work is not suited to this kind of piece. The group reflects Witcover's predilections, and has never attempted anything but customary pieces that could be treated in a realistic way. Masterworks Laboratory Theatre has always tried to present these works in a more vivid,

precise, and imaginative realization on the stage.

Citing Roger Planchon as his idol, Witcover seeks to extend the work of the Group Theatre to the classics in order to make these plays meaningful in terms of contemporary life. Conversely, when working on worthwhile new material, Witcover attempts to give it the respect due a classic.

The word "conventional" comes up time and again when talking to Witcover. The term is used in different ways. When he describes his approach as conventional, he means "not avant-garde" but middle-of-the-road, as has been described earlier. However, he uses the word "conventional" to attack the existing ways of presenting the classics. In this sense, he is referring to the traditional nineteenth century mode of stock characters, trite performances, hackneyed interpretations, and a general repetition of what others have done before. Unfortunately, the use of the word "conventional" can lead to confusion here. Generally, when Witcover uses it to describe his process, he means realistic in the Stanislavski tradition, and when he uses it to describe work he does not like, he means tired, lifeless, and old-fashioned.

Opera

Witcover has not hesitated to present operas in

ways that are at once a departure from tradition, yet adhere to his humanistic philosophy. Often changing the time and place of these works, and even rewriting entire acts in an attempt to breathe new life into them, the group has nonetheless dealt with this material in the realistic tradition of Stanislavski. The changes that have resulted in the finished product were never pre-conceived; they were always the result of a collaborative rehearsal process. Not once did Witcover, or one of his students, deliberately set out to rewrite an operatic work, but through exploration and improvisation they often evolved entirely new scenarios for the work, which they felt better served the intent of the composer. At times attacked for what some critics view as serious transgressions, Witcover feels he has always been true to the larger design and meaning of these operas, making them more accessible to a late twentieth-century audience. The chapter on the rehearsal process of La Traviata demonstrates this, as will a discussion of Witcover's production of Gilbert and Sullivan's The Gondoliers.

Productions Created from Material Not Originally
Intended for Dramatic Presentation

Witcover's rehearsal techniques have also led to theatrical productions that are in some ways unique and hard to classify. Constructed of material that was not

always intended for dramatic presentation on the stage, programs like A Serving of Verse, an evening of letters, poetry, and songs, were created during the rehearsal period by the collaborative efforts of the performers and director. In discussing that particular production, Witcover, with hindsight, wishes a clever dramaturge had also participated in the rehearsals so that the material would have been more carefully organized and edited. However, the evolution of the production is interesting in that it demonstrates another possibility, another path to creating drama.

The Phases of Rehearsal

Perhaps the best way to understand Witcover's "process" is to examine ways in which the rehearsals of the group take place. Generally, the rehearsal period is broken into three phases or steps. The rehearsal period is not arbitrarily divided into three equal time periods to accommodate these phases, and one phase tends to blend into another, but in retrospect, all the directors interviewed, including Witcover, found the time allotted tended to be equal. The phases are: (1) reading and research, (2) improvisation, and (3) staging. For Witcover, staging is a very special term. It means the actors finding their own way in the playing space; Witcover does not block a piece until the last few days of rehearsal. Witcover also

likes to hold off decisions on the set, costumes, and properties as long as possible--a technique that has driven many producers to distraction. Witcover also makes it a point never to block a play in a rehearsal studio, but always on the stage or performance space in which the piece finally takes place.

Phase One: involves exploration into the characters; their relationship to one another within the text. Often the period of a piece will be changed in presentation, but the initial research deals with the actual time in which the writer or composer has set his work. Witcover has gone to great lengths during this phase. For a recent production of Yellow Jack, he had his actors enroll in a medical laboratory course to become familiar with the equipment and procedures used by doctors and nurses. For La Traviata the actors-singers had to prepare written autobiographies of the characters they were portraying and explore their relationships both as characters in the opera, and as actors in life with each and every other character with whom they came in contact during the course of the action of the opera. Those who were able were required to read the libretto in the original Italian, and those who could read French were assigned the novel and play of Alexandre Dumas films. All involved had to research the manners, mores, and dress of the period. Although the production finally evolved so that it was set in the

United States today, Witcover believed that this kind of systematic investigation helped to fertilize the minds of the actors, helped to implant the seeds of action in the actors, helped the actors to realize the needs of the characters they were representing, and generally made them more aware of the intent and meaning of the composer and librettist.

Like Stanislavski, Witcover feels that this in-depth approach should lead the performers to the kind of behavior and action on the stage that will best express visually in space the events, whether evident or hidden, that tell the story and convey the underlying human emotions of the work. It is believed by disciples of the "method" that if this preparatory work is fully realized, the inner being and scope of each character of the piece will be evident on the stage. During the early rehearsals, the director's task is to constantly ask questions of his cast concerning their characters and the circumstances of these characters, as well as the history and background of the play, opera, or story. These questions tend to stimulate deeper exploration on the part of the performer. When the actor or singer is far away from the material in personality, temperament, cultural background, or time and distance, the task of the director is more difficult. It is obviously easier to fertilize the minds of a group of contemporary American actors with the seeds of a Neil

Simon play than the seeds of an Alexandre Dumas film play. The work process, however, is always the same. During this phase, Witcover allows his actors to paraphrase the text; and the magic "as if" of Stanislavski is always used. When the director recognizes that a certain level of involvement has been reached, and the performers seem deeply in touch with the characters they are portraying, phase two should begin.

Phase Two: involves improvisation. At this point, he never allows improvisations of the actual events of the play, but limits the improvisations to the past life of the characters, their life off-stage and their relationships with each other. Thus actors may work out the flow of their day prior to their entrance on the stage but the actual events to be played on the stage are worked out much later. During this phase, Witcover supplies his actors with whatever properties or furniture they might need so that during a moment of inspiration, the actor can follow his impulse into a completed action on the stage. As in the first phase, more work is needed when the actor is far away from the material. (Suitable behavior in the American actor is easier to achieve with less improvisation for a Tennessee Williams play than it is for one of Ibsen.) When the elements seem to be coming together, and the actors are becoming the characters of the play, they are finally permitted to deal with the events of the

text.

Phase Three: staging. Like his mentor, Lee Strasberg, Witcover feels that a play rehearsed in the above way will stage itself and pace itself well. During this phase, improvisations on scenes and actual events in the play take place. It is also at this time that the physical set, properties and costumes are finally selected. Many of the objects used during the earlier phases are discarded. The blocking of the production comes last. This rehearsal procedure is almost a reversal of the procedure that most directors follow.

Each production of Masterworks Laboratory Theatre is a unique case history; I have chosen several plays to examine closely, as paradigms of the "process." Some of the programs to be discussed are hard to categorize in that they contain selections that are from classic plays, songs not written for dramatic presentation, and scenes from operas. The reader may also take exception to labeling some of the works discussed as "classic." The program of Eugene O'Neill plays is one such example. Perhaps "important" or "non-contemporary" would be a better description, but the director, Nyla Lyon considers the plays "classic."

Whenever possible, I have interviewed the participants of the various productions to discuss the "process"

in action. Reviews and criticisms have also been included to give a sense of the "results" of the work. The Masterworks Laboratory Theatre "process" which is really Witcover's version of the "method" applied to directing, is still evolving.

PART V

SELECTED PRODUCTIONS

CHAPTER IX
"CLASSIC"
OR NON-CONTEMPORARY PLAYS

Three Plays of the Sea by Eugene O'Neill

In August 1970, Masterworks Laboratory Theatre presented three one-act plays by Eugene O'Neill, Moon of the Caribbees, Bound East for Cardiff, and In the Zone. Although these plays were not written in that order, and were not intended to be done as a trilogy, the characters in all three are the same and the three pieces create a linear time sequence spanning 1913-1915, thereby making a sensible unity when presented together.

They were directed by Nyla Lyon who had stage-managed Acts III and IV of La Traviata when the group presented it at the Actors Studio. Lyon had come to New York in 1968 after receiving her A.A. and M.A. in speech and drama at the University of California at San Jose, where she studied directing with Charles Moore. Her background included work as a professional director, stage manager, and lighting designer at LORT theatres all over the country. She had been the production stage manager for the Stanford Rep at Stanford University prior to 1967,

and late that year, she served in the same capacity at the Arena Stage for the Living Theatre.

Under the Lindsay Administration, she directed plays in New York City prisons for a period of eight years. From 1972-1974, she also managed and produced the Stop Gap Theatre, an Off-Off-Broadway company in New York. At present, she is on the programming staff of CBS-TV and recently directed the successful Off-Broadway production of Last Summer at Blue Fish Cove which opened at the Actor's Playhouse in 1980.

During the time she stage-managed the two acts of La Traviata, she became a student of Witcover. Her approach to the O'Neill plays reveals the influence of her teacher, but her interpretation and execution of the "process" was highly individual. Not pressed by a tight rehearsal schedule, she and the performers were able to explore and experiment with the material.

Moon of the Caribbees takes place just before the outbreak of World War I. A British tramp steamer, the Glencairn, is at anchor off an island in the West Indies. Driscoll, Yank, and the other seamen are awaiting a group of prostitutes from the island who will bring rum and other forbidden alcohol on board for a party. As usual, when the women arrive, the men sign vouchers for any services performed, and the captain who is in on the game, pays the madame and takes the money out of the seamen's pay-

checks at the end of the month. There is a code for the services rendered so that it appears the seamen are merely buying food and clothing. The play centers on sexual frustration and competition, the central event being a fight in which one sailor, Paddy, is knifed. When the mate discovers the incident, he threatens to complain to the police that the women have smuggled rum on board. He chases them off the ship and tells them not to go to the captain for any money.

Bound East for Cardiff also takes place before the World War on a foggy night midway on the Glencairn's voyage between New York and Cardiff. The scene is the seamen's forecandle where in one of the lower bunks in the rear, Yank is dying. The play has a transcendental theme and contains much symbolism with the mid-Atlantic being a kind of limbo. Despite all the efforts of the seamen, Yank dies, as he sees in his hallucinations a "pretty lady dressed in black." The play shows the love these men have for one another.

In the Zone takes place during the war, in the fall of 1915, and is concerned with suspicion and panic. It opens just before midnight, as Davis appears in the doorway of the seamen's forecandle with coffee. He wakes the men for their turn of duty. Someone has left a porthole open, which presents a danger. Not only is the ship carrying ammunition and passing through mined waters,

but also enemy submarines are near, and might spot the light coming from the open porthole. While Smitty is on deck, Davis and the others express their suspicions about his behavior. They believe he left the porthole open to signal the enemy and some of the men have seen him put a mysterious black box under the mattress of his bunk. They find the box, and thinking it might be a bomb, drop it into a bucket of water. When Smitty returns, they tie him up as they open the box, only to discover love letters. These love letters reveal an unhappy relationship Smitty had with a woman named Edith. Smitty is reminded of that old pain and must deal with the new pain caused by the unfounded suspicions of his comrades.

It was after many months of research on the sea plays that Lyon decided to link the three works. She saw O'Neill as an observer, a man traveling "first class," although a seaman, on freighters around the world just before the first World War. Loving the sea herself, she saw this period in the history of American shipping as unique, and wished to make a statement about the men on these ships.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, "Iron Men" worked on board "Wooden Ships," but by this time, "Wooden Men" were working on "Iron Ships." The plays are not, in my opinion, sentimental nor do they have any fat. I cut three lines from the three plays for the production and that is all.¹

1. From an interview with Nyla Lyon, November 18, 1978.

As a director, Lyon was very aware of the symbolism in the plays but decided to direct them in a totally naturalistic style to avoid underlining the symbolism. She also wanted to avoid any sentimentality in the presentation.

Her research included many visits to the Freighter Museum on Staten Island where she gathered material and ideas. As a result, a simulated freighter was created on the stage with the prow cut away exposing the insides; the bunk area with five wooden bunks, and a pot-bellied stove. The outside of the hull was seen, re-creating the ship construction of the period. The ship was angled down from the upper stage right to down stage left for a distance of 40 feet from the bridge to the bow. It looked as if a ship had crashed through the wall of the Theatre-in-the-Courthouse and remained there. A cyclorama hung in the background. The playing areas were on the ship itself.

The cast of twenty was assembled from acting classes at the Herbert Berghof Studio and open calls listed in the theatrical newspapers. While Witcover did not constrain Lyon to set an opening date for the production, she ultimately took it upon herself to do so as a means of discipline. To avoid any pressure, however, she allowed for a twelve-week rehearsal schedule during May, June, and July. Wanting the final presentation to tell the story of a group of seamen in three basic human

experiences, the thrust of her early work in rehearsal attempted to create an ensemble of men that would function as a crew--the crew of the Glencairn.

The cast and staff were all present at the first rehearsal which lasted five hours. It was, in reality, a company meeting at which the members of the cast introduced themselves and socialized for the first three hours. The next two hours were spent explaining her ideas about the plays to the cast. The actors were told to start growing their hair and beards in any way that would make them feel like sailors. Most of the actors were young, and one actor, Lance Henriksen, had been to sea. They were told to do research and bring to rehearsal any questions, ideas or problems they might have about becoming seamen. The next two rehearsals were spent discussing the text; Henriksen and Lyon answered any questions the cast raised about the sea. Henriksen explained what it was like to work on a ship.

Lyon and Burton Kneager, who also served as property master, explored the various dialects of the crew members.² Mimeographed sheets with these dialects broken down phonetically were distributed among the performers, so that they could begin work at once on the vocal demands of their roles, so they would not be distracted by the

2. Ms. Lyon claims there are seventeen different dialects represented in the three plays.

problems of speech during company rehearsals.

On Friday of the first week, the rehearsal was devoted to a four and one-half hour improvisation. The night before, the actors had been told to go home and return the next evening as the characters they were playing, as if on leave after six months at sea. The courtroom was converted into a bar-whorehouse with a real bar, real beer, rooms, and beds. The actors entered the rehearsal improvisation as they were told. During the four and one-half hour period, fist fights broke out, and relationships were defined. The bonding of men that occurs on a ship, and elements of the class system among sailors and officers began to evolve. Relationships were being created and the actors began to get more of a sense of the characters they were portraying. In this way, actors who had not had the experience of being sailors in real life were gaining a sense of the experience to some extent.

During the improvisation, one man emerged as "Jack Tar."³ It was, naturally, Henriksen, who played Driscoll, who established himself as the leader during this time. He was also aware of the goals of the improvisation in advance. Lyon dismissed the actors, letting them "sit on the event" for the whole weekend. On the following Monday

3. On a ship, "Jack Tar" is the strongest, leanest, and meanest of the men; the leader.

night, the actors came to rehearsal bursting with ideas, discoveries, and enthusiasm. At the end of this rehearsal, the actors themselves put together with platforms the areas they would ultimately be playing in. Lyon and Henriksen designed the set, the Glencairn, with these playing areas in mind. The ship was built over the next two and one-half months--day by day, by the cast. The second week of the rehearsals was spent on improvisation and creating the environment of the ship. The actors learned to love and hate each other, as the characters they were portraying. Lyon described this process as a "tribal group experience."

The third week was devoted to the first play. The blocking was allowed to evolve except where there were traffic problems or special focus was needed. For the first play, Moon of the Caribbees, Margaret Cowie, an opera singer from the West Indies who played the native woman, Pearl, selected and performed West Indian songs. For the most part, these were pre-recorded, although she and Lisa Mayo who played Bella, performed some live during the show.

During the fourth week, the second play, Bound East for Cardiff, was rehearsed, and in the fifth week, work was done on In The Zone. During the sixth week, the plays were rehearsed every other night, and by the seventh week, the plays were run together every other night, alternating nights being used for trouble spots.

Having the luxury of time, Lyon could now afford one month to polish the production. In the tenth week, the actors-sailors dressed the set which they had built, which Lyon said helped them create the environment in which they performed. The eleventh week was spent on technical rehearsals and the last week on dress rehearsals with invited guests in the audience.

Because she was a woman, Lyon was doubted at first by some of the cast members who questioned her ability to block and choreograph the fight scene in the production. One actor left the cast for this reason. To create confidence among the actors, Lyon carefully and specifically blocked every moment, both for effect, and the sake of safety. Even the "break-away" pottery used in the scene had been made by the company members so that they had a greater feel for it. The brawl was rehearsed in steps. First it was choreographed and played in slow motion. Over a period of weeks, the tempo was gradually increased so that it eventually was played at full speed.

Moon of the Caribbees presented a challenge. As Lyon said, "It is a short play that really was never finished."⁴

The difficulty of Bound East for Cardiff centered around playing a 45-minute death struggle. Yank was played

4. Nyla Lyon, interview.

as if he were fighting for life. In the Zone dealt with fear, at first subtle, growing to a point at which it is out of control. Nyla Lyon stated:

One had to play against the fear. One had to play one's motives and suspicions. The fear was a result.⁵

As the actors were working without pay, every effort possible was made to invite critics and reviewers. Lyon felt that this was the only reward she could give the actors, to let them be seen and reviewed.

After the first few performances, the production played to "standing room only" audiences. Contributions by the audience surpassed \$1,500.00. Some of the reviews appeared too late to stimulate potential producers to visit the production. Under the Off-Off-Broadway code, the group was limited to 12 performances. The final performance was on August 28, 1970.

The rehearsal procedure worked, however, to create a real ensemble among the performers. Alan Bunce in The Christian Science Monitor said:

The company displays a nice flow of ensemble action, free of the hollow laughter and gratuitous yelling that often stands for color in companies trying to portray stagnant all-male groups, although plenty of bellowing is there when needed . . . some of the screaming symbolism is smoothly integrated into the whole.

5. Ibid.

. . . Moon of the Caribbees immediately suggests the latent strength of the young O'Neill . . . Director Nyla Lyon has managed a highly persuasive sense of sweat, idleness, speculation, and a hunger for meaning among the sailors at anchor off an island in the West Indies during a summer evening in 1913. . . . in Bound East for Cardiff the potency of the O'Neill grasp on human nature increases. . . . The direction resists the sort of trickiness that would have wiped out the shipboard realism.⁶

However, critics differed--Mel Gussow:

The direction does not always seem helpful to the plays. Often many in the cast seem to be acting atmosphere, particularly in The Moon of the Caribbees, the slightest of the plays, and the one that can be hurt by overemphasis. The actors drink with gusto, laugh uproariously (occasionally in chorus), wrestle athletically, chew gruel ferociously, and do their best to blow the play down. O'Neill's atmosphere is not staged business. It filters the plays like fog and should seep to the audience, not submerge it.⁷

Arthur Sainer in The Village Voice called the production ". . . respectable. Not inspired. There is no new view taken," but went on to say:

. . . Nyla Lyon has directed with much sensitivity and has organized the vast stage and large cast intelligently so that there is both simultaneous life in various areas of the stage and yet stress where the focus needs to be."⁸

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6. Alan Bunce, "Early O'Neill Threesome Revived," The Christian Science Monitor, August 28, 1970, p. 4.
 7. Mel Gussow, "Early O'Neill: Three Plays of The Sea Drawn from Life," The New York Times, August 20, 1970, p. 39.
 8. Arthur Sainer, "O'Neill: The Last Liberation," The Village Voice, August 27, 1970, p. 39.

Backstage said:

Eugene O'Neill is alive and well and being performed with artistry at the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre . . . O'Neill's staggering insight into the human condition is beautifully realized in this production.⁹

One of the most positive reviews appeared, alas, after the close of the production. Lawrence Wunderlich wrote:

. . . The Masterworks Laboratory Theatre, which has mounted a near-brilliant production of three of O'Neill's early sea plays . . . they are beautifully set and lit by Lance Henriksen and Nyla Lyon, the latter having directed them with enormous understanding and sensitivity. And a large cast headed by Lance Henriksen, Roy Barnitt, James Hummert, and Harold Oringer, is good enough to break your heart. I wept unashamedly, the production is now closed, and no responsible producer has come down the pike to move it to Off-Broadway for a "commercial run." Talk about the sad state of the theatre. Talk about heartbreak.¹⁰

Lyon was able to create in a relatively short time a strong ensemble which played realistically. With no desire to highlight the symbolism of the plays, the environment created was also realistic. While the enormous ship-set dominated the playing space, the actors were always separate from the audience, and no attempt was made to create a so-called "environmental" production, so popular at the time. The emphasis in the production was

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9. Norman Kennelly, "Three by O'Neill," Backstage, September 4, 1970, p. 18.
10. Lawrence Wunderlich, "The Summer Circuit: Off-Off," Cue Magazine, September 5, 1970, p. 15.

on the verbal life; the words of the text and the natural activities of the men on board the Glencairn. The treatment of the material, although focusing on the ritual involved in shipboard life, in no way resembled productions of the Ritual Theatre movement also popular in the late 60s and early 70s. The actors remained the characters they portrayed and were never used as objects or parts of the ship as they might have been in a Joe Chaikin production or one of the Living Theatre.

There was an overwhelming concentration on real activities in the presentation which, as we saw, distressed Mel Gussow. This criticism was well taken by Lyon who now realizes the text of the play should never have been overshadowed by the director's imagination. Today, like Witcover, she realizes that with good plays, "Less is more."

Boubouroche

In June, 1971, Masterworks Laboratory Theatre presented its most ambitious program to date at the Theatre-in-the-Courthouse. Boubouroche, an adaptation by Georges Courteline of one of his own stories, was first presented in Paris in 1893 by Antoine, founder of the historical Théâtre-Libre. Walt Witcover approached the direction of the new English version by Albert Bermel as an entirely new work.

During the winter of 1969-70, preliminary exploratory work had been done in workshop by Jerry Stiller as Boubouroche, and Nancy Ponder as Adèle, his mistress. Years earlier, Stiller and Ponder had worked together in a nightclub act and Stiller's professional relationship with Witcover began when he performed in Witcover's production of Three Times Three in May 1956, with Anne Meara and Charles Nelson Reilly. The early work on Boubouroche was halted in 1970 because Stiller had other professional commitments. It was resumed in the spring of 1971 and a four-week rehearsal schedule was planned from April 19 to May 16, which was ultimately expanded. Three preview performances were given on June 5, 6, and 7, and the production opened as a workshop on June 9. To attract agents, producers, and potential backers, performances were given on Wednesday and Monday nights, as well as on weekends until June 21.

Boubouroche has many of the elements of a naturalistic play, but is a biting satire on the manners and morals of turn-of-the-century Parisians. As directed by Witcover, the action of the play grew into a frenzy of farcical behavior until Act II, where the level of parody reached burlesque.

In Act I, which takes place in a gas-lit neighborhood cafe, Boubouroche and his pal, Potasse, are playing a card game called la manille against the partnership of

Roth and Fouettard. Boubouroche is a tough and demanding player and at one point, his partner, Potasse, who can't take the criticism, wants to leave the game. However, Boubouroche persuades him to continue to play. Soon it is 8:45 p.m. and the team of Roth and Fouettard must leave to return to their homes. Roth and Fouettard are losing and should pay the bar tab as well as their debt to Boubouroche and Potasse. Boubouroche, however, picks up the bar bill and tells them he will wait until the end of the month to settle the debts of the game. After the two losers leave, Potasse tells Boubouroche he is une poire, a sucker. Potasse also proceeds to discuss Adèle, the mistress that Boubouroche has been keeping for eight years. We learn as the two men review the history of the relationship, that Boubouroche pays her bills and is very grateful for anything Adèle gives him in return. Adèle, too, is making une poire of Boubouroche.

After Potasse exits an elderly gentleman arrives looking for Boubouroche. He is Adèle's next-door neighbor and confirms the suspicions of Potasse. It seems Adèle has been having a visitor for some time--a young, handsome gentleman.

Act II takes place in the salon of Adèle's apartment. Her frequent visitor, André, is there. At the first knock of the door, André hides in the armoire. But it is a false alarm, as the intruder is looking for a

Mlle. Tambour who lives on the floor above. The game is repeated as the doorbell rings and André bolts for the armoire. It is another false alarm. However, the third time, as the doorbell rings, it is really Boubouroche at the door. He enters like a raging bull. André is already hidden in the closet. After a confrontation with Adèle, Boubouroche discovers André. An absurdly comic exchange ensues and André leaves. The play ends as Adèle convinces Boubouroche that André is not her lover, but a poor relation of which the family is ashamed--the skeleton in her family's closet. As Adèle swears her fidelity, we see Boubouroche as he really is--une poire.

This kind of material could have easily lent itself to a very superficial approach; a concentration on the comic elements and what so many British and American theatre artists believe to be the "French Farce Style" of the period. Under the direction of Witcover, the piece was rehearsed with great attention paid to the inner life of each of the characters including the silent ones in order to create an atmosphere that was at once theatrical and non-contemporary, grounded in truth, and which served the overall intention of the writer. A picture of this overall approach emerges from an interview with Peter Schlosser, one of the performers in Boubouroche.

Each of us in the cafe had our own inner life.
We spent two weeks improvising in rehearsal.

I was a glazier and a designer of stained glass and during the action of Act I, I made sketches on napkins. However, we all worked to create the outward manifestations of the inner life of our characters without diverting the audience's attention away from Boubouroche and his table. All of us, even if we did not speak in the play, had an organic life, a "who am I?"¹¹

To achieve this kind of an ensemble and to make a generalized chorus into specific characters in such a short time, a precise rehearsal procedure was followed. Three elements, the product of Witcover's research, served as an overall source of energy for the work. A painting by Cezanne of a bistro crowded with men playing cards, hats on their heads, lost in the smoke-filled atmosphere, became the image for Act I. Schlosser and Witcover found songs which had been written for another Courteline vaudeville. These songs helped create the period for the performers and many were integrated into the finished presentation. The "spine" of the production came from the English translation of the name Boubouroche: soft rock.

In the first three rehearsals, the actors drank coffee and French brandy while they played cards with the songs in the background. Some may see this as a waste of time; however it helped the actors to get to know one another, thereby eventually becoming an ensemble.

11. From an interview with Peter Schlosser on November 29, 1978.

Witcover wanted to establish a feeling of mutual trust and respect among the performers. Sensing that the young actors might be in awe of a prominent actor, both Jerry Stiller and Witcover were careful to keep the proceedings as democratic as possible. The character of Boubouroche, however, is an imposing one--a rock. It is only in Act II that we discover how soft he is; so Stiller remained slightly apart from the chorus members. He was an authority figure in their eyes, an actor who had achieved some success, and it well served the internal situation of Act I. During these early rehearsals, the actors were shown pictures, costumes, and objects of the period. Witcover as director remained a background figure during this phase; a guide who at times questioned the actors and stimulated them to ask questions. He said:

Years earlier I saw Roger Planchon's production of George Dandin. I can only describe it as realistic. The characters were live on the stage. They were real people behaving as human beings. The material and the physical elements created the period feeling for me. But I believed the performers. I wanted to do Boubouroche in this way, to take characters in a situation from the past and make it happen now in front of an audience.¹²

Discarding the technique he had used earlier in La Traviata, Witcover did not ask his actors to prepare written biographies for the characters they were portraying. Witcover had learned that such biographies

12. From an interview with Walt Witcover, February 9, 1981.

force actors to make choices too soon, and such choices are at best conventional and at worst, incorrect. He preferred to allow the actors to make discoveries more slowly as the result of experimentation and improvisation. He continued to encourage the actors to do the same kind of exploring they had been trained to do in acting class. As the rehearsals progressed, a feeling of fun emerged and the actors made discoveries that Witcover was able to incorporate into his final staging. The playing style of the period of this work is, at best, conjecture; Witcover and the performers, however, arrived at a vivid, colorful mode of behavior that seemed suited to the material. Each of the performers developed a "life line" for the character he was portraying. The overall playing style was realistic. Any touches that might have added a feeling of turn-of-the-century France were left to Witcover for the final days of rehearsal, but much of the final staging was the result of the collaborative work of the performers.

The second phase of rehearsals involved improvisation. It was during this phase that the inventiveness of the actors, allowed to experiment, produced results in scenic terms which Witcover later used in solving the problems inherent in staging the work. Keeping the rehearsals fluid, the goal was to make all the events of

the text concrete in spatial terms; as outwardly visible as possible. Witcover wanted the piece to move as if it were a film. The actors were encouraged to use the space as they saw fit. Eventually, a free-flowing use of the space evolved. It became apparent that three general playing areas were necessary. The use of the playing space came out of the improvisations and it was only after this phase that the designer started to create the set. The final blocking was left to the last few rehearsals and only at this time was the set constructed. Thus the work of the actors helped create the set rather than the set's imposing movement on the actors. While the costumes and objects of the play were given to the performers early in rehearsal, their use of space was only in response to the staging problems uncovered during the rehearsal procedure. The three playing areas created the sought-for fluidity which was further enhanced by not having an intermission.

In an attempt to explain how the "process" leads to results, Witcover continued:

. . . What I was saying about Planchon's George Dandin, it seemed to me the performers were behaving in a realistic way. The way people probably behaved in that period. The treatment of the text was in no way superficial. That's what I try to do. I want to reveal all the inner content of the script in vivid terms. In order to help myself find the way, I let the actors experiment with as much freedom as possible which often leads to scenic results that help me resolve

the staging problems of the piece. As we examine the text more deeply in rehearsal, we come up with more ideas to use in the final staging. The theatricality or physical atmosphere that dresses the final production is really my creation. I try to provide this mounting so the audience can accept the production has having an appropriate style. I call this "framing," and within this framing or theatrical dressing, I always have the performers play in what I call a realistic style.¹³

Thus, the imagination of the performer will help Witcover with his "framing." In Boubouroche, an improvisation led to the solution of a problem created by the playing space. The stage of the Theatre-in-the-Courthouse was an open space on the same level with the audience which was arranged in semi-circular fashion around three sides of the courtroom. This meant that the audience came into a theatre with no proscenium or curtain to separate it from the playing area. In order to create more theatrical distancing for this non-contemporary piece, and pull the audience into the proceedings gently, many solutions were tried. It was during an improvisation that Gayle Swymer, dressed in contemporary clothes, found the trunk where the Boubouroche costumes were stored. She encouraged the other actors to join her and change into the costumes of the play. This became part of the final staging. While this prologue was taking place, Ken Schmidt, an accordionist, played the "Cinquintaine Waltz," a sentimental Parisian tune of the period. Then Swymer,

13. Ibid.

by now established as the flower girl in the play, led the singers of the company onto the stage and into the play. During this entrance, they sang "Gai Papillon" in French, and the stage was actually dressed by the other performers. After the audience was seated, the company sang, "Le Mastroquet de Suresnes," much as a group of clients would in a pub or bistro. Thus the play was "framed," the audience brought into its reality, and the difficult problem of an open space solved. Witcover sees this kind of happening as a group creation, and likens it to the work of Chaikin, while recognizing the differences between them.

This fluid way of working can also lead a director to imaginative discoveries of his own during the rehearsals. After two weeks, it became clear to Witcover that he did not want an intermission, any interruption in the flow of the action of the play. Yet, the first scene is a public one, a bistro; and the second is a private one, the apartment of Boubouroche and Adèle. The movement from Scene One to Scene Two can also be seen as a movement from the outside to the hearth, or from anxiety to security (although that security is but an illusion). The problem for the director becomes one of not only moving the audience emotionally from one kind of space to another, but also the actors. Witcover chose a storm outside as the background for this change. The storm symbolized

Boubouroche's inner state as he leaves the bistro after hearing stories of Adèle's infidelity. The set change was achieved by the actors and singers as part of the action of the play, while Jerry Stiller stormed around the room and left. Lisa Mayo, as the patronne of the bistro, with Stanley Brechner as the waiter, performed "La Dernière Maîtresse," while disposing of the properties of Act I. This was done as part of the normal cleaning-up activities, as if it were perfectly natural for these characters to close up the bistro in the action of the play. The song was a biting comment on the state of mind of Boubouroche. Joined by the rest of the company, they went on to sing, "L'Électeur Embarrassé" and "Une Plaine Eau," also a reflection of the state of affairs as the total set change was completed.

All of the songs woven into the production were arranged by Peter Schlosser and James Litt, the musical director. Later, the music also served to underscore the action in Act II; while Adèle hides André, her lover, in the closet, Schlosser and the men sing, "Marche des Scolaires," which was an amusing comment on the events of the scene. As in cinema, the music added to the tension of the play. The finale included the whole company in a medley of these songs. Witcover feels that all of these solutions came to him during the rehearsal process.

Generally, the reviews were favorable.

Emory Lewis of The Bergen Record wrote:

Even his actors who have no lines at all are meticulously observed individuals and they people the French cafe in the first act with a rich and varied humanity. Mr. Witcover is a perfectionist of visual detail.¹⁴

And Jon Carlson wrote in The Village Voice:

Taking his cue from the Theatre Libre perhaps, he [Witcover] amassed and ordered a plethora of realistic detail that was stylistically, if not always historically, accurate.¹⁵

In his New York Post review, Jerry Tallmer complimented the use of music:

It must, thus, be done just right, and that's the way it's done by Witcover, down to the evocative songs of the period, splendidly sung by the entire cast, especially during a beautiful-to-watch scene-change from cafe to Paris apartment between acts.¹⁶

In a short period of time, Witcover and the company were able to create a life for the play and an ensemble. Jon Carlson stated:

In the first act, which takes place in a turn-of-the-century cafe, the silent actors who form the background . . . provide not only color but also interesting counterpoint to the main action, without distracting from it.¹⁷

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14. Emory Lewis, "Stiller Brilliant As Loveable Patsy in Boubouroche," The Bergen Record, June 16, 1971, p. C15.
 15. Jon Carlson, "French Theatre," The Village Voice, June 24, 1971, p. 56.
 16. Jerry Tallmer, "Jerry Stiller Stars in a Courteline Comedy," The New York Post, June 10, 1971, p. 54.
 17. Jon Carlson, The Village Voice.

Thus, despite the limited time spent on rehearsal, Witcover was able to deal with semi-classic "period" material in an organic way, creating stage business which brought the material to life. Again from Mr. Tallmer's review:

. . . And much other business for which I guess the word is organic, rather than forced. One bit, indeed, with a brown wool shawl, might, I thought, have first happened by accident and been built on, marvelously, by Mr. Stiller and his stage mistress, Nancy Ponder.¹⁸

Tallmer also found it marvelous how Adele ducked the bright knitting for her lover's cap into a hideous vase every time the doorbell rang, and brought out the knitting for the solemn black confection she was making for Boubouroche. The red socks of André were drying on the rack inside the black socks of Boubouroche, so that there could be no giveaway. In the end of this short piece, Boubouroche discovers his young punk of a rival resulting in agony and confusion and absurdity, as the young man forces his card upon Boubouroche who wants nothing more than to get him out of the apartment; not to duel with him; and who has to wait flabbergasted while the young man packs his carpetbag with his personal property, including shaving mug, trumpet, badminton bat, and ice skates. Tallmer also delighted in Miss Ponder's great moment of pulling the wool, tremulously, over

18. Jerry Tallmer, The New York Post.

her ninny's eyes. Tallmer thought that Stiller was a fool of immense dignity, humanity, and decency because of his underplaying with occasional breakthroughs of force.

Boubouroche earned \$1,091.10 in contributions, far short of the final costs of the presentation: \$4,446.01. However, the production gained more lasting friends for the troupe, like Emory Lewis, who also wrote in his review:

Sometimes quality crops up in the most unexpected places . . . I saw a magnificent production of Georges Courteline's little-known French farce, "Boubouroche," at the Theatre-In-The-Courthouse. It was one of my most memorable theatre experiences.

The courthouse is operated on a shoestring by the non-profit Masterworks Laboratory Theatre, one of the truly creative and seminal workshops in New York. The company should be lavished with foundation money. The city should restore this neoclassic Italianate, red-brick courthouse (it is an architectural landmark), and give it to these masterly mummies.

This troupe possesses that most precious of all gifts--the unmistakable imprint of art . . .¹⁹

However well-received the production was by some, others thought there was room for improvement. In an interview on December 4, 1979, Nancy Ponder said:

I disagreed with Walter on many points in my development of Adèle. Courteline is a Master and a Master gives you the clues. Walter wanted Adèle to be a Paris housewife. He saw her as strong. But she doesn't keep house--she is not a housewife. We did not agree on the costume--it was wrong. It should have been more luxurious, a negligee instead of street clothes.

19. Emory Lewis, The Bergen Record.

Walter and I developed delicious stage activities, however, I now see that they altered Adèle from the character Courteline intended . . . a woman who manipulates and controls through her charm, and her fragile, helpless manner--getting her way by being adorable and demanding like a child. She became more of a "typical" Paris housewife--bourgeois--concerned with domestic things she should have scorned . . . Don't mistake me, the production was, for me, full of delights.²⁰

Another review in The Village Voice written by Dick Brukenfeld was less positive than the Carlson review. Brukenfeld wrote:

. . . In Walt Witcover's production of Boubouroche, at the Theatre in the Courthouse [sic], the actors speak to each other, but there's little dialogue. There's lots of pauses where the actors seem to be waiting for substance to pop out between the lines, rather than showing us who the characters are and what exists between them.

Yet interaction is crucial to Georges Courteline's ironic comedy of a man who can win such victories as a bridge game, or getting his mistress' lover to move out, but who is really a loser . . . Here the first act seems like a naturalistic play, the second like a farce. He directs a life-paced, casually focused naturalism, strong on atmosphere, weak in characterization.²¹

Brukenfeld found Stiller likable and funny, but felt his portrayal didn't build. He considered Ponder's performance to be very off-handed, and he felt the actor playing André was unconvincing.

20. From an interview with Nancy Ponder, December 4, 1978.

21. Dick Brukenfeld, "Boubouroche," The Village Voice, June 24, 1971, p. 52.

The Marriage by Nikolai Gogol

In February 1972, Masterworks Laboratory Theatre presented Eric Bentley's version of Gogol's The Marriage, at the Madison Avenue Baptist Church, 30 East 31st Street, which was rented for the production. The Courthouse had been auctioned and sold by the City late in 1971.

The production had 14 weeks of rehearsal, three weeks of previews, and ran for four weeks. The set was designed by Jeffrey Moss, and the costumes, which were rented, were in keeping with the period of the play.

As in Boubouroche, traditional folk songs were integrated into the production. These Ukrainian folk songs were arranged by N.V. Lysenko and sung by Jay Pierce, Alice Rosengard, Marika Siebert, Robert Schlee, and David Vogel who played workers in the theatre and at the homes of Podkolyossin in Act I, Scene 1, and Miss Agafya in Act I, Scene 2, and Act II. As the same set was used for both homes, the singers-workers helped cover the set changes as well as adding atmosphere to the production.

There had been open casting for the production. Actors were chosen from outside the company as well as from the classes of Walt Witcover. However, there was still a basic nucleus of people who had worked together in class or in Masterworks Laboratory Theatre. The production was partially funded by the New York State Council

for the Arts.

Act I of The Marriage opens in the bachelor quarters of Podkolyossin who is discussing marriage with his servant, Stepan. While he talks of his desire to get married, his passivity and lethargy reveal that he is quite ambivalent about the subject. Fiokla Ivanovna, the matchmaker, arrives to tell him of a young maid, Agafya Tikhonovna, who has a substantial dowry. When Kochkarev, Podkolyossin's married friend, arrives, he dismisses the matchmaker and takes over the courtship arrangements himself. The second scene of Act I is set in Agafya's parlor where she is discussing marriage with her aunt and guardian, Arina. When the matchmaker Fiokla arrives, she describes a list of suitors to Arina. One by one the suitors arrive for an interview with Agafya. Once gathered together, some very comic situations develop. Finally, Podkolyossin and his agent, Kochkarev, arrive.

Act II deals with the competition among the suitors. Podkolyossin with the aid of Kochkarev wins Agafya's hand. Alas, the thought of married life panics him and he flees for his freedom out the parlor window.

The rehearsal procedures of this production illustrate some of the hazards of the "process."²²

22. The rehearsal process was reconstructed from an interview with Walt Witcover, February 9, 1981.

Initially, Witcover intended to use the first two weeks of rehearsal for research and exploration in which the actors could personalize the material and begin to absorb the concerns, feelings, and objectives of the characters they were to play. The next two weeks were to be spent on improvisation on the events that do not appear in the play, but are referred to by the characters. The problems began at once. Having lost the Theatre-in-the-Courthouse, rehearsals began with no knowledge of the playing space in which the piece was to be performed. The second major problem was casting, and the first problem accentuated the second. As Witcover had selected some actors who were not used to working his way, many panicked when they learned that Witcover was working in a vacuum without an idea of where they would perform. This seeming lack of structure led many of the performers to leave. New actors had to be found, which retarded the rehearsals, as well as creating greater insecurity among those cast members who remained.

When a second cast was assembled, the group spent time listening to Russian folk songs of the period. Witcover invited several native Russians to the rehearsals who lectured on the mores of the country during the time in which The Marriage is set. The guests spent several work sessions discussing the text with the actors. Several important and useful facts were revealed. Many of the cast,

for example, were surprised to learn that, at that time in Russia, plump or fat women were considered very desirable and, therefore, more marriageable.

Trouble erupted anew, however, when David Margulies who had been cast as Kochkarev, became impatient with rehearsals. Not used to working this way, he balked. As the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre did not pay its actors, nor have any contractual arrangement with them, there was no way in which Witcover could oblige him to stay. At the end of the third week of rehearsals, Margulies was replaced with Thom Koutsoukos.

This cast change precipitated another crisis. Koutsoukos as Kochkarev had many scenes to play with Stanley Brechner as Podkolyossin. To save time, Witcover put them "on their feet" into the improvisational stage too soon. Both actors were not at ease with one another, and neither had yet focused enough on the character elements of their roles nor the given circumstances of the text, to enter this phase of the work. Brechner was not prepared because he had lost valuable rehearsal time due to cast changes. As the text implies a friendly but strong competition between Kochkarev and Podkolyossin, both actors seized upon this theme in their insecurity. Falling back on their own personal competitiveness as actors, the improvisations grew more and more tense until a fist fight erupted at one rehearsal. Brechner subse-

quently threatened to leave the cast. Eventually, through careful examination of the causes of the irritation and some hurriedly scheduled meetings among Witcover, Brechner and Koutsoukos, a way was found for the two actors to work together. The incident, however, had a negative effect on their relationship in the play. (As characters in The Marriage they are, above all, friends while being competitive.) They were never really able to establish the warmth between Kochkarev and Podkolyossin that the play called for. The incident also did considerable damage to the overall sense of ensemble. Witcover, looking back on those rehearsals, feels he should have been more aware of their feelings toward one another, and never obliged them to improvise without the proper preparation. He recognizes this as one of the traps of his approach. Since then, Witcover has tried to be more careful about throwing actors into improvisations too soon.

Another casting mistake was corrected by external circumstances, but it, too, took its toll on the production. Before rehearsals began, Witcover had assigned scenes from the play to one of his students, Carol Sanders, who was attractively plump and had brought interesting ideas to the role of Agafya, the heroine. However, during the casting sessions, he chose an actress with much more experience, Kay Michaels, who at the first reading, appeared to be Agafya incarnate. Michaels

rigidly stuck to her preconception of the role and did not grow, nor invent anything new during the improvisational phase of the rehearsals. She simply was not attuned to the working methods of the rest of the cast, and when she had to leave the production late in December to work in California, Witcover was relieved of the task of firing her. He replaced her with Carol Sanders who had lost valuable rehearsal time and who became part of a cast that was weeks ahead of her in the work process.

With the cast set, the rehearsals proceeded. Those actors who remained seemed able to work without a clear idea of the acting space in which the final staging would take place. This allowed for great freedom in the rehearsals and much of the stage business that resulted from the improvisations, Witcover was eventually able to use in the finished production. However, this free-wheeling atmosphere also led to some problems which Eric Bentley was to point out later. Witcover states that he began rehearsals without any overall concept for the play. This was his way of working. Fortunately, during the improvisational phase of the rehearsals, a shape for the play emerged. It became a kind of contest, horse race or steeplechase. Witcover accepted this as a viable way to present Gogol's work. The Marriage became a commentary on competition, with marriage and the arrangement of marriages as commerce, which is in keeping with Gogol's

intent.

Eventually, a functional use of space, on several levels, was arrived at which allowed for the fast and constant pace that was becoming evident in the rehearsals. This playing arrangement was such that it could be easily transferred to any open space, and when the Madison Avenue Baptist Church was found for the production, the three-level set was readily moved. As usual, the actors had properties, furniture, and other objects to work with from the third week of rehearsal, but the final form of the presentation took shape during the last week. Each and every member of the cast had become a specific and definite character and the final staging or blocking was a result of the collaborative effort of the entire cast. A rich and vivid background for the piece had been created, but the problems faced during the early rehearsals left little time for final refinement.

Owing to Witcover's insecurity resulting from rehearsals, he did not invite reviewers. He did, however, invite the play's adapter. Eric Bentley wrote the following letter to Witcover, which reveals some of his impressions of the production:

I want to thank you again for staging The Marriage so well. I'll add here the one or two reservations I had . . .

Within the production scheme proper, I thought two things should be changed. The first is the conversion of the matchmaker into a malaprop. Malaprop is a fool, and that association, I fear,

will stay with her linguistic habits--a fool pretending to bigger language than she can manage. Gogol's matchmaker, on the other hand, so far from being a fool, is the one whose shrewdness wins out at the end of the story; the "clever" Kochkarev is outdone by her.

It is therefore a mistake to give her traits which undercut this, the main line of the action . . .

The other thing is purely a matter of rhythm and timing. I think the action of the show is unduly slowed down at times by the musical and mime additions. It is as if there would be a musical interlude in the midst of a Chaplin comedy-- while the camera stops . . .

On the music itself, I had a minor comment: that we hear the same little songs too often, some of them begin to pall before the end . . .

Let me add that if the actors must occasionally improvise a phrase they must take care not to do so in a language that is not in the style and period of the dialogue generally. I was upset on Saturday, when someone said, "For crying out loud," and so on . . .

Actually, it is dangerous to improvise in a masterpiece, since improvised dialogue is loose in rhythm, while the dialogue of Gogol's play is disciplined, stylised, tight. The style was spoiled whenever an actor broke up a sentence, repeated part of it and the like. Each sentence as it comes from the author or adapter should be the right length with no provocation to make it shorter or longer. If actors felt this was so, they would not be tempted to those little "improvements" which only [make them] sound nervous and uncertain of themselves. . .²³

Salon-Comédie

In April 1974, Masterworks Laboratory Theatre presented two works of Alfred de Musset with translations and adaptations by Mary Helena Day. The plays, A Door Must Be Either Open Or Shut and You Cannot Think of Everything,

23. Eric Bentley, a letter to Walt Witcover, dated February 20, 1972, on file at the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre, 40 West 22nd St., New York, N.Y.

were billed as two Proverbs of de Musset.

A Door Must Be Either Open Or Shut starred Jane Alexander as the Marquise and James Noble as the Count. The play, built around a marriage proposal, is a comedy of seduction. However, the spectator soon sees that with marriage proposals, it is not always the man who initiates the action. De Musset shows the subtle ways men are manipulated into making proposals by women, and the author reveals some insights into the true position of women in society that are as valid today as they were in the nineteenth century.

The play takes place in one act and one scene, in the parlor of the Marquise, a widow, who is receiving the Count, a suitor. During the scene which is a verbal fencing match, the Count accuses the Marquise of trying to trap one M. Camus, a millionaire, into marriage. The Marquise, in turn, is trying to find out more about the Count's female protégée. While it appears that the Marquise is going out later that evening with M. Camus, she finally manipulates the Count into a declaration of love and a marriage proposal. She accepts.

In the second play, One Cannot Think of Everything, the leads were played by Nancy Ponder as the Countess, Timothy Jerome as the Marquis, and Ted Forlow as the Baron. To help create the framing in this production, dance was used, and thoroughly integrated into the action so as not

to retard the forward flow of the piece. Music was also very much a part of the staging of the play. Jonathan Golden played Chopin.

One Cannot Think of Everything is in one act, made up of ten French scenes. The Baron has arrived at the country home of the Countess de Vernon, a widow, looking for his nephew, the Marquis de Valberg. He has a conversation with Germain, the servant of the Marquis, in which he explains that he has come to fetch his nephew and take him to Gotha, Germany, the next day. The Duchess of Gotha is expecting a child and the king wants to send the Marquis as his ambassador. This is an exceptional opportunity for the nephew. When the Marquis appears, his uncle explains their mission to congratulate the Duchess and convinces his nephew to pack his trunks. While preparing for the departure for Gotha, the Marquis reveals that he wishes to marry the Countess de Vernon. The Marquis is absent-minded and eccentric. He informs his uncle that he wants the Countess to consent to the marriage before he leaves and that he may even take her with them to Germany. After the uncle exits, the Countess appears and has a scene alone with her suitor in which she reveals that she visited Germany with her late husband and disliked it very much. As the Marquis is anxious for an answer before his departure, he once again proposes marriage. After much verbal sparring, he convinces the

Countess to elope with him on his diplomatic mission, when the Baron arrives to announce the Duchess is dead and the trip is cancelled. The two lovers must elope elsewhere.

The rehearsals ran smoothly in spite of the fact that Alexander, a busy actress in the commercial theatre, cinema, and television, was simultaneously appearing on Broadway in Find Your Way Home. For her it was an opportunity to work on a part that is too rare in the world of commercial theatre, and this kind of material, when produced in the United States, is too often done in a very superficial manner. Witcover and the cast were able to create a life and environment that was suitable to the mid-nineteenth century setting of the play, and the style of playing emerged naturally from the organic work the group was doing. Every physical action on the stage was justified in terms of the "inner" life of the characters of the piece. As the non-contemporary flavor demanded behavior that was foreign or extravagant to the performers, their "inner" scores had to be that much stronger.

The production of these two translations and adaptations by Day presented specific difficulties for Witcover, as director, which came from the literate use of language in the texts. It was for this reason that he chose the material. Searching the library for a piece on which to work with Salome Jens and Nancy Ponder, he

happened upon these nineteenth century plays which were translated and adapted late in that century. The idea of working on material with a rich verbal life with actors trained in the Stanislavski method intrigued him. His goal was to prove once and for all that American actors were capable of performing so-called classic material without falling into all the tired and conventional patterns so often seen in productions of this genre. His first order of business was to find a cast of performers with the physical instruments, vocal training, life experience, and sophistication he felt were necessary to attempt de Musset. As the cast was small, he quickly assembled one to his liking. Salome Jens had to leave the production shortly after rehearsals began for a film commitment, and Jane Alexander, excited by the challenge, replaced her.

The plays were written by de Musset after he stopped presenting material in the commercial theatre in France. No longer able to accept the constraints of the Parisian theatre of his time, he retreated from the commercial scene, and began to write "closet" drama, which was often performed in the salons of his friends for a small, elite group. This led Witcover to a format for the production. The plays would be presented as if they were in

his (Witcover's) own home, and he would be the régisiseur. Although starting with this overall concept, Witcover did not have any specific results in mind. After Alexander joined the cast, a short (for Witcover) rehearsal period of six weeks began. As in other productions, the first two weeks were spent on research. The entire cast absorbed information about Parisian life in that period; life in the countryside and in the salons of Europe, specifically France, while listening to the music of Chopin and Liszt. This background helped the actors to personalize the material. Looking back, Witcover feels that some of the actors were more able to submerge themselves in the atmosphere of the period than others; yet at the end of the two-week period, he began improvisations, believing that all of them had a good sense of the characters they were to play. Actions and activities that were imaginative, fresh, and original emerged from these improvisations. The playing that resulted was realistic and the theatricality or the production's "framing" would have to be created in other ways. Normally, that would have been Witcover's job. In this case, however, he had some very experienced actors in his cast. One improvisation actually led to the staging of the opening of the production. Alexander and Ponder had discovered a line drawing of a salon with George Sand, Chopin, Liszt, de Musset, and others which they tried to simulate as an

acting exercise. The resulting tableau was incorporated into the production, and clearly shows how imaginative collaboration can lead to effective stage business, and how the right atmosphere which allows the performers the freedom to create can also aid the director in his work. Witcover was so stimulated by the work of his actors that he readily found other scenic devices that helped supply the romantic world in which the plays exist. The production became one of frank artifice and presentational effect which evolved during the rehearsal period.

To further pull the audience into this romantic world, Witcover moved the settings of the plays from outdoors to indoors. The rationalization for this was interesting. In the stage directions for One Cannot Think of Everything, de Musset is vague about the setting of the piece. The only direction given is "Scene One: The Country." During the improvisational phase, the company discovered the scene worked well outdoors in a garden filled with the sound of birds and insects. These sounds were produced by other actors in the production and added to the artifice. To further create the atmosphere of a country garden, the scene was played around a gazebo and to produce greater fluidity, some of the actors changed the gazebo into a piano for the next scene, which took place indoors. This added to the charm of the production as well as leading the audience, emotionally, indoors.

The stage business had been the result of improvisations, a solution to the problems of "framing" the plays. Once inside, the audience discovered a highly contrived set with windows and doors painted on nineteenth century backdrops. The music of Chopin added to the illusion and the audience was made to accept the realistic playing of the actors as the appropriate style for the plays.²⁴

Witcover attempted to keep the rehearsals as open and experimental as possible. He feels that the final production was the consequence of the collaborative effort of the group. The actors were eventually able to handle the rich verbal life of the plays with naturalness and ease, and performed the material in a realistic way. If there were an illusion of style, it resulted from the so-called "framing," an integral part of the production. Some members of the cast have discussed the shortcomings, as well as the virtues of this production. In an experiment with this kind of material, the results can be examined in the light of the actors' comments and the one existing review.

On January 4, 1979, Nancy Ponder discussed the production in an interview.

This material was written as Salon Comedy. It was meant to be seen close up as there are many subtleties written into the script. It is so intimate that the "lift of an eyebrow" by an actor

24. Walt Witcover, interview.

is terribly important. The last scene of the piece where they declare their love is terribly intimate; so intimate that it should be played up front near the audience so that we (the actors) are not obliged to broaden too much our expressions or gestures. I wanted to play it up front but Walt insisted we play it at the second level--as such, I never felt it really worked. Another problem for me was my costume. I felt that as the Countess, I would be the sort of woman who spends the day in a negligee until that time of day when I would dress for dinner in an evening dress. I wanted a vulnerable, soft negligee for the first scene of the play--instead they built a costume that was heavy and moved poorly. Another problem was the casting of Timothy Noble, whose personal characteristics and idiosyncracies matched those of the Marquis de Valberg. He knew nothing about the work process we used and was not familiar with our theatrical language. While his performance was marvelous because he is both extraordinarily bright and talented, it put a great burden on him and the rest of the cast.²⁵

This casting problem was verified by Ted Forlow, who added:

Sure we had problems with Timothy, but it really opened his eyes. Because of his association with Masterworks Laboratory Theatre, he has studied acting and has grown as an artist enormously. In this sense, the experience was a truly positive and learning experience.²⁶

Miss Ponder went on to describe the more successful aspects of the production:

The physical flow of the production was lovely. Walt, in costume as an impresario, presented the evening, as three footmen seated [themselves] in the audience. These noble youths became an orchestra of birds and animals, gathered around a gazebo on level one of the playing space, led

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25. From an interview with Nancy Ponder on January 4, 1979.
 26. From an interview with Ted Forlow on January 16, 1979.

by Walt in concert. As this was going on, Jane Alexander, Ted Forlow, Jonathan Golden, Timothy Jerome, James Noble and myself formed a "tableau." This painting featured George Sand, Frederick Chopin, and Alfred de Musset, and as it faded, the first play began. Another enchanting effect was changing the gazebo into a piano. The three footmen, in a ballet, took apart the gazebo which, when turned upside down, became a prop piano for our piece. In this way, we also moved from the exterior garden into my salon and also covered the set change.

As the piano was not real, I had to coordinate my playing of it with Jonathan off-stage. We rehearsed the mechanics of this--a great deal of theatre is just plain timing--until it was exactly right. It always looked as if I were playing the piano.

Generally, the production worked well. We did not over-rehearse which had been the case in some MLT productions. I personally believe in deadlines.²⁷

Even with a name like Jane Alexander in the cast, reviewers were generally reluctant to cross over the bridge to visit the Spencer Memorial Church in Brooklyn Heights. Only Norman Rosten, a resident of Brooklyn Heights, attended the production. The following are some excerpts from his review:

The opening work, "A Door Must Be Either Open Or Shut," is a little gem starring two versatile actors: Jane Alexander as the Marquise and James Noble as the Count. It is a comedy of seduction with some startling echoes of Women's Lib which is not the subject at all. You might say the subject is How to Propose Marriage, or Who Proposes to Whom? It is an amusing portrait of manners, played with grace and style by Ms. Alexander and Mr. Noble.

Style is the key to the success of the second play. "One Cannot Think of Everything" simply cannot be summarized; the title is a hint, but

27. Nancy Ponder, interview.

only a hint, of the zany quality of this dazzling, fey, distracted, abstracted, bewitching work. Witcover's staging here is perfect.²⁸

Rosten felt the direction caught every nuance of comedy in acting and movement. He praised the ingenious use of the piano and other sound effects, as well as the ballet woven into the piece. The actors were described as having performed with exquisite comic timing.

Jane Alexander, in a letter dated April 2, 1979, expressed some slight personal reservations about the production.

. . . I think it's terrific that MLT continues to produce the plays it does--and I was grateful to be able to do, to attempt, the de Musset play. I was fatigued, as I remember, a good deal of the time because I was performing in Find Your Way Home on Broadway at the same time. I will never do that, double duty, again.

It is difficult, too, to do "showcase productions"--not because of the space, time or status (or lack of it) involved but because eventually there is not enough \$ to do it RIGHT. Of course, all the money in the world will not assure that a piece will be done "right"--but an early 19th century play which so concerns itself with manners and mores, should have the support of seeming elegant, even if it is illusion. This was a problem I felt our particular production faced . . .²⁹

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28. Norman Rosten, "Salon-Comedie is Bright at Spencer Memorial Church," The Brooklyn Heights Press, April 11, 1974, p. 11.
29. Jane Alexander, from a letter to the writer of this dissertation, dated April 2, 1979. On file at the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre, 40 W. 22nd Street, New York, N.Y.

Generally, all concerned felt the project was well received. It demonstrated the Masterworks approach and showed that this kind of material could be made interesting and charming while played in a realistic way. The overall stylistic touches were superimposed on the production by Witcover. However, as was the case with many of the productions of The Masterworks Laboratory Theatre, the final staging and indeed some of the theatrical business had come from the collaborative efforts of the cast.

It is also interesting to note that the production was mounted within a relatively short time and most of the cast interviewed felt that worked to their advantage, which seems to imply that actors do not like openended rehearsal periods, that they do not like to over rehearse and that a tight schedule offers them the kind of structure they need to function. Witcover made a great effort not to create a pressured atmosphere and now admits that in some cases a short rehearsal period works well. But he feels that one can work quickly only with extremely experienced actors and still believes that longer rehearsal periods offer more room for growth and experimentation.

Lessons In Love

In June 1976, Masterworks Laboratory Theatre presented Lessons In Love, a program composed of eight love scenes. As before, this project grew out of class work. In an interview on February 4, 1979, Witcover explained some of the practical problems the group faced at this time.

It became too costly to operate at the Spencer Memorial Church in the winter, and unpractical in the summer; heating costs were rising and in the summer both actors and spectators fled the heat of New York. Then it was hard for any one of us to commit ourselves to directing a whole project. No one had the time to devote to a project for which they were not being paid. It became more and more difficult to hold on to actors, too--the good ones left to get paying jobs. However, as we were receiving public grants, it really behooved us to put on a show and thus continue our exploratory work.³⁰

The solution was to present a program that would divide the directorial chores among several people. The nucleus of the Masterworks group, most of whom were in Witcover's professional classes, read scenes during the winter of 1975-76, and gradually a program of love scenes, light and comic in spirit, emerged. This program also enabled most of the performers to play more than one part, and it would serve as an interesting showcase. The first part of the program was built around scenes from seventeenth and eighteenth century pieces. Sheridan's The

30. From an interview with Walt Witcover on February 4, 1979.

Rivals, directed by Don Marlette; Congreve's Love for Love, directed by Walt Witcover; Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew, directed by Don Marlette; Vanbrugh's The Provoked Wife, directed by Walt Witcover; Farquhar's The Beaux Stratagem, directed by Walt Witcover; and Sheridan's The School for Scandal, directed by Don Marlette. The second half contained two late nineteenth century pieces from Schnitzler's La Ronde, directed by Terry Walker, and Courteline's Afraid to Fight, directed by Gayle Swymer. The program also followed the evolution of the love relationship; the early scenes dealing with courtship, and the later with marriage.

Lessons in Love differed from most of the other Masterworks productions in that it was cast, rehearsed, and presented within a five-week period. As the program was made up of scenes from eight pieces, it is interesting to examine the rehearsal procedures to learn how the "process" works without the luxury of time. The program was a collection of scenes directed by several people, but it was still necessary to develop an overall form or thrust for the production. It would appear that Witcover walked into the rehearsals with a definite and preconceived game plan, and that many of the steps in the rehearsal period that he would have taken, had he had many months to work on the production, were, by necessity, eliminated. The scenes that had been worked on in classes

for months and were partially developed were given to Marlette, Swymer, and Walker to direct; Witcover undertook the task of casting and rehearsing the new material.³¹

In an interview on March 16, 1981, Lenore Fuerstman who worked in The Gondoliers as well as Lessons In Love compared the rehearsal process of the two productions.

The rehearsals were intensive and not spread out as they were in The Gondoliers. I remember how intimidated I was because I had never dealt with classical language before and I didn't know the actors I would be working with. The first rehearsal for The Beaux Stratagem took place in an outdoor restaurant in Brooklyn Heights. While we ate and drank in the garden of the restaurant we read the scene and discussed the meaning of all the period idioms and language . . . like "a pox on you." I went to the meeting feeling miscast, but I felt better after that sort of seemingly social afternoon. It really broke the ice and started us (the actors) on the relationships we would have in the play. For the next two weeks, we rehearsed without the script. While the improvisations were very free and seemingly un-directed by Witcover they were all built on situations in the scene. We did not spend time on improvising on material that dealt with our prior lives or the flow of the day. The improvisations always were without the text as written, we only paraphrased. The focus was always on the action and activities in the scene and never the language; we dealt with the situation and not the words. However, as the physical life became more stabilized, we gradually started using the exact words of the text. It was only during the last week when the final blocking was set that the text became exact. I was never on my feet with

31. Most of the information about the production was reconstructed from interviews with Terry Walker on January 31, 1979, Gayle Swymer on February 2, 1979, and Don Marlette on February 15, 1979.

the script. I seemed to absorb it by reading it at home and bit by bit using it in the improvisations. I gradually lost my fear of the classic language . . . Every object, property and costume piece seemed to help us. Nothing was chosen for its theatrical effect; it had an organic connection to what we were doing. It helped us develop a behavior that was in accord with the text. However, there was little time for experimentation with objects and costumes. Witcover selected what he thought was right and would serve us and the material. He gave us what we needed. I began to see that in The Gondoliers he also knew what we needed or at least what he wanted us to have to build a certain feeling, relationship or effect, but in that case, because we had the time, he led us into the discovery of an object or costume. In Lessons In Love, all was given to us and fortunately it all worked. I began to see that so many discoveries that I made in The Gondoliers were really already in the back of Walt's mind; he led me to them, creating the illusion that they were my discoveries. However, as an actress, I felt much better when I thought they were my own. In the work on Love for Love, we did lots of improvisations around the central event, the seduction. We never played for laughs but with the utmost seriousness. I thought I was terribly miscast but the scene, when presented to an audience, got a lot of laughs. I learned the best way to get laughs is to be serious.

One night I had an accident. While clearing the table in Love for Love, I caught my long necklace on a chair. With both hands full, I had to use my knee to work the necklace loose. My dress was cut low, with lots of cleavage and the result nearly brought the house down. I worked the necklace loose and stayed in my dress but I totally broke up the house. Walt did not want me to repeat it. It was a wonderful accident which we should have had on film but we felt there was no way of recapturing the spontaneity of the first time.

I learned another lesson on this theme when during dress rehearsal Roy Barnitt and Dorothy Dorff were doing Afraid to Fight. In the scene, the doorbell rings. I was not in the scene, yet Walt told me to go on the stage as a servant and answer the door. The surprise interruption of a new character created a great effect and a laugh and it was kept in for the performances. However,

the disorientation we felt during the dress rehearsal was never recaptured and the bit never worked as well again . . . The process did continue even after the show opened. Walt is never afraid to allow changes if it helps the show.

Walt did a lot of research and together with Michael Hume, our musical director, found music and songs that helped the total sweep of the production. The music was chosen to relate to the scene that was ending as it flowed into another. It served as an introduction to the next scene either thematically or because it expressed the period of the piece. I was one of the four singers that performed these songs. We also served as stagehands as the music was used to cover the set changes. Walt used this idea in many other productions. It worked, but all the business was arbitrary. We did not develop it out of improvisation; Walt imposed it on us. As a result it always felt mechanical. We learned the music during separate rehearsals with Michael Hume and we knew the songs before Walt staged them . . . I'm sure Walt would not have dictated so much to us if he had had more time.³²

The production was only attended by local reviewers.

In her review in the Phoenix, June 10, 1976, Babette McKee wrote:

. . . The musical program, accompanied by a chamber ensemble, is a treat in itself and well worth the price of a ticket alone. The voices of Tad Motyka, Jon Tanner, Carmen Peterson, and Lenore Fuerstman are clear and bright and melodious. The notes ring true and are reached with ease and grace. The four singers are stylishly interlaced with the scenes, but never intrude upon the action. They create a delicious frame around the cameo scenes as they introduce each new presentation. The singers also carry the props and change the scenes in such a way as to adapt to the style of the period and to add a dash of elegance to the evening's savory romp.³³

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32. From an interview with Lenore Fuerstman, March 16, 1981.
33. Babette McKee, "Masterworks Coquettish Cameos-- Delightful Theatre," The Phoenix Magazine Section, June 10, 1976, p. 16.

McKee found that all the scenes dealt with the strategies of love and generally not between spouses. She faulted the scenes from The Rivals and The Taming of the Shrew because the heightened moments of crisis and reversal were smoothed over, passing unnoticed into the next moments of the scenes. However, she did like the inventiveness of Marjorie Lerstrom as Katherine and Don Marlette as Petruchio. McKee described as delightful the pieces from Love for Love and The School for Scandal. Dennis Patella and Joanne Schmidler were praised for capturing the ambience of two trysting lovers in the selection from La Ronde. The closing scene, Afraid to Fight, played by Dorothy Dorff, was criticized for being slow and lacking vitality. McKee praised the professional appearance of the group, and called their work clean, neat, and artistically envisioned, the smallest details of the production being handled with expertise.

The following is from a review by Norman Rosten.

There is a good deal of making and unmaking beds, making and unmaking of beds [sic], and the use thereof, in a spirit more comedic than carnal, which is perhaps as it should be, since love observed seems less serious than love practiced. Observed and practiced love are both in evidence during the evening, to amuse or instruct according to one's fancy. The emphasis is on love's sportfulness, its deceptions and betrayals and the general confusion of its participants. The 18th century scenes are played in a satirical style, bordering on farce, with Congreve's "Love for Love" a high point, deliciously interpreted by Lenore Fuerstman and Dennis Patella. A scene from "The Beaux Stratagem"

reveals another aspect of love wherein Marjorie Lerstrom and Richard Cox give us a stormy seduction; another seduction (and there are many) engineered by Mr. Patella and Joan Schmidler is perhaps over-seduced but quite funny.³⁴

Rosten went on to praise Witcover's bit in The School for Scandal but felt the production was uneven. He described it as a grab bag evening, qualifying the criticism by praising the radiance of theatre which emanated from the group.

34. Norman Rosten, "Notes on Stage--Lessons in Love on Remsen Street," The Brooklyn Heights Press, June 10 1976, p. 12. Syntax or spelling errors are the newspaper's.

CHAPTER X
COMPOSING IN ACTION/MUSIC IN SPACE

The reception of the La Traviata project at the Actors Studio led Witcover to further experimentation with lyric theatre and the staging of songs. Experiments in Lyric Theatre, March 1970; Mozart as Dramatist, May 1973; Lovelives, June 1974; and Mozart and Molière, May 1977, are all linked by Witcover's basic approach. The thrust of all the work in this area is to present music in space so that it appears to be written to fit the action which accompanies it. For Witcover believes, as I have stated before, that most directors working in musical theatre do not seem to be able to coordinate the physical action of the actor-singer with the words and music written by the librettist and composer. The result is a stilted separation of physical action from the words and music. Often, in such cases, the physical action that does exist seems arbitrarily imposed on the performer and does not help him express the inner content of the material. Witcover tries to create the effect that the words sung by a performer are a result of the physical situation taking place. The singing, or musical expression for

Witcover becomes a heightened expression of the event of the text taking place on the stage. To this end, Witcover was meticulous in following the music as written by classic composers; indeed, even more strict than many directors who have staged musical works and opera. In La Traviata Witcover restored cabalettas and other musical phrases that traditionally had been left out of the work. This approach continued with the other musical experiments. Witcover always tried to conform to the texture of the music and obey the dictates of the musical scores with which he was working. He did not set out to change the scenarios of the operatic pieces he was exploring but often that was the result. Frequently he was faulted by critics for disregarding the stage directions or scenarios of operatic material. In part this occurred because operas have a prior and historical stage life and people are used to seeing them presented in a certain way. In the staging of concert songs which are normally presented without any scenario, his critics had less tradition with which to confront him. Witcover sees the director's job as one of creating physical action in space to express better the full meaning of words and music; using the inner line of the text, the inner line of the music, and the inner line of an actor-singer's personal score to create an outer action in which one can see as well as hear the intention of the composer. As choreographers make patterns in time

and space set to music, Witcover attempts to do the same. He creates a series of actions that are detailed and thoroughly choreographed to the musical score. Unlike dance where the result is a poetic stylization or essence of human passion, the work of Witcover attempts to be realistic. His scenarios are constructed to show believable human characters behaving in a normal way (a daily life way) although often in extravagant situations. The vocabulary is realism in the Stanislavski tradition as opposed to the work of a Joe Chaikin or Jerzy Grotowski who, in their search for theatrical truth, use the body and voices of the actors in new and extraordinary ways. Martha Graham, George Balanchine, Joe Chaikin, and Jerzy Grotowski all searched for a greater expression of human passion and drama and yet the approaches and results were different. Witcover decided to disregard the past staging of operas and musical works to create his own mise-en-scènes. In this respect, he and his performers became the composers of the action.

Witcover early learned that staging solutions to given dramatic problems could come from the performer. Actually, his actors in their class work, improvisations, research and explorations often came up with ideas that ultimately led to the final staging. In the last phases of the work, the actions were set rigidly to the music. The movements of the actor-singer in space were ultimately

tied so diligently to the musical events in the score, like rests, modulations, and credenzas, that they could be said to be choreographed. Yet, they had to appear spontaneous, as if they were occurring for the first time, suiting the words and actions to the music, and vice versa.

Beginning with the music and text, every musical event in the score was examined in order to create an inner life or inner monologue for the performer which would lead to physical action and life on the stage. Often liberties were taken with the libretti and especially the stage directions found in these libretti; stage directions that were often written years after the libretti by stage managers, publishers, and editors, taking them from some production which had been presented at the time of publishing. While many were offended by the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre's presentations of classical musical works because of their fixed notions of how they should be presented, just as many were stimulated and pleased by the new spirit they found in them.

Experiments in Lyric Theatre: March 1970

This production had its birth in Witcover's musical theatre class at the Herbert Berghof Studio. All of the students in this class were professionals who were working on musical material in a purely experimental and exploratory way; a way in which they could not work in

the commercial theatre. It was only as the pieces developed that Witcover had the notion of presenting it to an audience as a series of experiments. Proceeding on the theory that any pre-determined idea of the form of a work tends to blind the director and performer to its content leading to a reliance on hackneyed presentations of the composition, the aim of the rehearsals was to find fresh and surprising new ways to present these lyric pieces.

The first order of business in the rehearsal procedure was to erase any traditional concepts about the material from the minds of the performers and to achieve this goal, Witcover, both as teacher and director, was careful not to set up any emotional or physical obligations to the material for the singers-actors. Remaining a background figure during the improvisational phase, he did, however, take note of interesting stage business and emotional results that evolved, which he later incorporated into his final staging of the production. The performers were given freedom in these early rehearsals. As the work originally developed in a class setting without any of the pressure created by a fixed schedule, Witcover attempted to offer a similar environment during the actual rehearsals. Allowing ample time between work sessions, the actors were able to let the material on which they were working penetrate their beings. The creative ideas came slowly, often when the participants were away from

the rehearsals-- during relaxed moments. Not wishing to lock himself or his performers into pre-determined spatial demands, any and all decisions on final stage set were avoided. At this point in his career and his "process" this principle had become an integral part of the rehearsal procedure. The final design of the playing space or stage was allowed to evolve as a function of the needs of the performer in the given situation. The lack of structure of this method of work proved problematic in that some of the performers, rather than finding freedom, became insecure. Witcover had great difficulty keeping the rehearsals fluid. As director, Witcover also learned that initiating the rehearsals for a piece without any preconception of its final form is a fantasy. As all actors have a specific instrument, range, and persona, the production of a work is always locked into a certain kind of performance or result, as soon as the performers are selected. However, Witcover was able to avoid a traditional presentation of the material by not casting to type, offering performers roles they would not normally be given in the commercial theatre and guiding his performers into unusual choices during the improvisational phase. He often had to reiterate to his cast that the goal of the production was not to create a finished work that adhered to custom in order to please an audience but rather to experiment and discover where this experimentation would

lead--to see what new and unusual forms could be created from the material.

The program was made up of musical selections both old and new and a one-act play, Problems, Problems written at the turn of the century by Courteline. The first selection was from Bizet's Carmen. Micaela's aria, "Je dis que rien ne m'épouvante" in the third act was performed by Margot Albert. In traditional productions of the opera, this piece is set in an exterior location, in the mountains, and is usually performed on a stage set representing a rugged background of rocks. However, Albert developed a scenario which called for an interior location. As Micaela, she has secretly gained entrance to the private apartment of Carmen in which she lives with her lover, Don José. Her rage at having been rejected by Don José is further inflamed by the personal effects or objects in the room. The resulting action supporting the aria was direct and simple. As Micaela rifles Carmen's clothes and jewelry, her anger grows. Witcover wanted this anger to be controlled and released so that the changes of tempi and pitch in the musical score would help express it. The exercise became one of great discipline. Albert was eventually able to show her anger in actions that were tightly choreographed to the changes of tempi and pitch, making the aria more than a generalized vocal display of anger. The vocal changes in the aria were

attached to specific feelings about her ex-lover and to certain objects belonging to Carmen. In an isolated scene from the opera, Albert's choices were anything but traditional. However, Witcover felt the presentation of the piece remained faithful to the intent of the Bizet score while displaying a vital and interesting interpretation which gave new life to the work.¹

The next selection in Experiments in Lyric Theatre was from Menotti's The Medium. Lisa Mayo played Madame Flora and sang most of Flora's material in Act II of the work. Once again, the use of improvisation led the actress to create her own original scenario in which the character Madame Flora began to hallucinate. She imagines the room being invaded by phantoms and demons. In her attempt to keep them out, her activities include pulling down shades, shutting the curtains, and closing the doors of the room. These physical activities were in keeping with the tempi of the music which had been broken down so that each beat of Miss Mayo's acting score was linked to the specific changes in the music. A series of basic actions, both clear and simple, in harmony with the music, told the story that Mayo created. Her objective was to create

1. As there were no reviews nor written notes on this production, I have reconstructed it through interviews with some of the participants. The description of Ms. Albert's work on "Je dis que rien m'épouvante" from Carmen is entirely from the recollections of Walt Witcover during an interview on December 12, 1978.

physical tasks that were easily executed on the stage; patterns in time and space that expressed the inner life of Madame Flora and clearly told the audience the story. This sequence of outer tasks created an unbroken line of action that was tangible and could be acted at will. In this way, Mayo was not obliged to rely on her feelings or emotions to play the scene. Because an actor cannot always get in touch with his emotions when performing, what was created was an actable scenario built of specific tasks in accord with the music. The combination of the activities and the music was enough to create a troubling and moving effect on the stage. In this way, Mayo felt she was also relieved of any emotional responsibility during the scene, which, paradoxically, made the emotion spring forth. She states, "It is almost an axiom, when you don't push for the emotion, it comes forth naturally and spontaneously."²

The scene ended with Madame Flora cringing in a corner, unable to escape her phantoms.

The next piece in the production was Schumann's Frauenliebe und Leben, performed by Helen Trowbridge. Originally, Trowbridge had been working on the fifth song in this cycle, "Helft mir, ihr Schwestern" (Help me, my sisters). She created a scenario in which she was about to

2. From an interview with Lisa Mayo on January 1, 1979.

be married and while dressing for her wedding, asks her sisters to aid her. The success of this musical scene in class led Trowbridge to create a scenario for the program which involved eight songs under the title "Frauenliebe und Leben" from poems by Adelbert von Chamisso to music by Schumann. The songs were sung in German after they were first read in English by Patricia Guinan.

Song 1. "Seit ich ihn gesehen" (Since I have seen him, I seem to be blind) was set in an office which Trowbridge is cleaning. We see that she is a receptionist in love with her boss. She sings of her love for him as she puts his belongings into his desk and tidies up his office.

Song 2. "Er, der Herrlichste von allen" (He, the most glorious of all). This scene takes place the same day after lunch and she is gift-wrapping a present she has bought for her boss, a pipe.

Song 3. "Ich kann's nich fasser, nicht glauben" (I cannot understand, nor believe it). She has been on her first date with her boss. They have gone to the opera. She returns home in a daze and she sings the song.

Song 4. "Du Ring an meinen Finger" (You ring on my finger, my little golden ring). Here she wakes up in her room the morning after he has given her an engagement ring. She is amazed at the ring, and proceeds to put away her childish toys (dolls, teddy bear, etc.) as

she prepares for married life.

Song 5. "Helft mir, ehr Schwestern" (Help me, my sisters, kindly adorn me). As her sisters help her prepare for her wedding, she gazes at herself in the mirror in her wedding dress.

Song 6. "Süsser Freund" (Sweet friend, you look amazed at me). Here, she has discovered that she's pregnant and looks at herself in the mirror to imagine what it will be like. She also takes material from her bureau drawer and creates a makeshift cradle to which she sings.

Song 7. "An meinen Herzen" (Oh my heart, on my breast, you my delight, you my joy). This scene takes place after the baby has been born and she is trying to photograph it through a glass wall as it is being held by the nurse, played by Gayle Swymer. The song was treated with great amazement and joy, which built to the contrasting sadness of the next one in the group.

Song 8. "Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerz getan" (Now you have caused me the first pain that really hurt). Here, her husband has died suddenly, and she returns to his office to collect his things. The new receptionist, played by Linda Stratton, opens the office for her. Once in the office, she sings the song. There are echoes of the music of the first piece in this song, so Trowbridge used the same objects, which magnified the

emotional effect. The inner life of her character was created in the scenario she had devised so that her outer activities would be in rhythm to the music. Since the text of each song had first been recited in English, her actions were concrete enough so that the audience understood what was taking place and what she was singing without understanding German.³

Next on the program was "The Pirate Jenny Song" from The Threepenny Opera of Brecht and Weill. The scenario of this song resulted from an improvisation by Gayle Swymer who performed it. Witcover realized it might shock and upset the audience, and deliberately left it in the program. After the Schumann song cycle, several stagehands appeared to change the set, and one of them spilled a container of liquid. Walt Witcover appeared from the audience and ordered Swymer, dressed as a janitress, to clean up the mess. He treated her poorly and at first the audience believed she truly worked on the premises. After he left her, she sang her song about how men had put her down. She mopped the floor with ammonia, while stagehands placed a transparent screen on the stage and cups of lemonade on a counter behind it. This was refreshment for the audience during intermission. For her revenge, the girl went behind the screen and the

3. From an interview with Walt Witcover on December 12, 1978.

audience saw her pour what appeared to be ammonia into the cups. The action continued as Swymer brought these cups into the audience and tried to force the spectators to drink. Her anger was so intense and the force of her will so strong, that the audience was effectively confused. Even Lee Strasberg, sitting in the audience, did not know whether or not to drink the lemonade. The resulting pandemonium led to the intermission.⁴

After the intermission, selections from Mozart's The Marriage of Figaro were performed. Susanna was played by Margot Albert; the Countess by Leyna Gabriele; Figaro by Sean Walsh; Cherubino by Gayle Swymer; and the servant by Stanley Brechner. From Act II, Susanna sang "Porgi amor" followed by a recitative sung by the Countess, Figaro, and Susanna. Next, Cherubino sang "Voi che sapete" followed by a recitative which included the Countess, Susanna, and Cherubino. The material for the act ended with Susanna kneeling before the servant singing "Venite inginocchiatevi." From Act III, the Countess sang "E Susanna non vien, Dove sono i bei momenti." The material from the Mozart opera had been developed over a period of two months using the improvisational technique that Witcover and Gabriele had used

4. From an interview with Gayle Swymer on December 10, 1978, and an interview with Walt Witcover on December 12, 1978.

when rehearsing La Traviata. Due to financial limitations the actors worked without period costumes and only a mere suggestion of a set. The goal of the experiment was to find logical and specific actions and activities which would express the music fully and dramatically without the aid of properties, sets, and costumes. This put a tremendous burden on the performers. The exercise became a test of whether or not the material, performed with imaginative activities executed in accordance with the rhythms and tempi of the musical score would effectively express the inner drama of Mozart's opera while avoiding the traditional presentation of the work. The selections from The Marriage of Figaro were another demonstration of the work process rather than an attempt to present the finished work.⁵

The next piece on the program was Problems, Problems, the American premiere of a one-act play by Georges Courteline translated by Albert Bermel. This was the only selection in the entire production that was not offered to the audience as an experiment. While the approach to the material was highly original, it was definitely a finished work, not a work in progress. Essentially, the play is one in which two women gossip. From their chatter we learn their attitudes about life

5. From separate interviews with Gayle Swymer and Leyna Gabriele on December 10, 1978.

and relationships. Lisa Mayo who played Caroline and Nancy Ponder who played Gabrielle had been exploring the material for some time in Witcover's professional acting class. The play is set in Caroline's apartment where she is getting dressed and curling her hair. The thrust of the work centers around what is sometimes called "genre activity." Using properties and items of clothing such as corsets that were actually antiques of the turn of the century led the actresses into a fascinating and amusing exploration of these property pieces and costume pieces. The specific qualities of the accessories used led the actresses into stylized movements much the way Stanislavski claimed it would. Rather than Witcover's superimposing a style on the piece, the resulting organic behavior of the actresses could be accepted as turn-of-the-century style.⁶

In an interview on January 4, 1979, Ponder discussed Problems, Problems.

Problems, Problems may be my favorite Masterworks' production . . . We didn't have all the properties and furniture until the last minute. As we were trying to arrive at "style" organically, we should have rehearsed in a full set from the beginning. But as it is a short piece-- it runs about twenty minutes--we had a chance to polish the score.

. . . Not all material is suited to a "method" approach. However, I felt my character, Gabrielle, could be explored this way. She is a character

6. From a joint interview with Lisa Mayo and Nancy Ponder on January 1, 1979.

that is easily distracted. In all, the particular signature of our approach, that is, a rich physical life, was right for this kind of material.

Walt had marvelous ideas for this physical life. However, I felt these ideas threatened the inner score I was creating. But with time and work, I did find a way of making Gabrielle's "inner landscape" correspond to the exterior life the director wanted.

. . . We found wonderful "bits" like my crying brokenheartedly while having only a three-inch square handkerchief with which to dry my tears.

. . . All in all, Walt provided an enchanting rich environment for the piece, true to the intentions of Courteline.⁷

Mozart As Dramatist

In May 1973, Masterworks Laboratory Theatre presented a program which continued the kind of exploratory work of Experiments in Lyric Theatre, called Mozart As Dramatist. As the title suggests, Witcover wanted to reveal Mozart as a dramatist; a composer who captured passions, struggles, relationships, and events of the human condition. Witcover saw Mozart as a deliberate and skillful man of the theatre whose vision of life was as important as that of any dramatist of his time and whose operas are great theatre. As the work once again began in the classroom, the genesis of the production was obviously an inherent part of the "process." In his musical theatre class at the Herbert Berghof Studio,

7. From an interview with Nancy Ponder on January 4, 1979.

Witcover had been assigning selections of Mozart as acting problems. He selected his cast because of their abilities and thereby influenced the choice of material. Elliot Cukor, a fine actor but weak singer, made a believable Don Giovanni because Witcover used him in a scene from the opera which called for little musical ability and much presence as an actor.

As in other productions, the exploratory work of the actors-singers during the improvisation phase of the rehearsals played an important part in the final staging. Witcover created the production from the imaginative physical life his performers evolved. He states that the final staging came from the performers and that his most important function as director was to keep the atmosphere of the rehearsals as free and creative as possible. To avoid imposing the problems of period costumes and manners on the performers, the work was rehearsed in modern dress. It seemed to Witcover, during the rehearsal period, that staging it in modern dress made the piece even more pertinent and timeless.

The setting of the selections of The Marriage of Figaro also came out of improvisation. The actresses Leyna Gabriele as the Countess and Annette Hunt as Susanna, felt the music of Mozart was more sophisticated than the plot of Beaumarchais and that their respective characters tended to be romantic and their feelings over-

stated in the music. They all agreed that this had been deliberate on the part of Mozart. During an improvisation, the actresses did the material as if they were 1920 flappers, monied ladies out of an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel. The experiment led to a possible way for the two women to sing the sophisticated material within a simple plot. At once Witcover saw the possibilities inherent in their choice and finally set the selections from the opera in Westhampton, Long Island in the 20s.

Great liberties were taken with the other pieces as well. Mozart's "Grazie agl'inginni tuoi" (Thanks to your deceptions), as performed by Carol Grant, David Dodds, and Peter Schlosser was presented as if all three were having illicit and secret affairs with each other. This approach led to a highly sophisticated and daring interpretation of the piece. It presented the "naughty" Mozart. Act I, Scene 2 of Cosi Fan Tutte was staged in a boat; a rather striking departure from tradition. The rise and fall of the music, not unlike the undulations of the sea, led Witcover and the performers to this staging which was the result of fruitful improvisation. After Act I, Scene 3 of the opera was performed, a fight erupted among the female performers. The fracas was finally brought to an end by Peter Schlosser, as the Peacemaker, singing "In diesen heil'gen Hallen" (These sacred halls know no revenge). The fight seemed so real

that one member of the audience wrote a note to the company, demanding to know why this was allowed to happen during a performance.⁸

This is a case where true friction led to an artistic discovery. For weeks during the final rehearsals the five sopranos were not getting along. Their rivalry threatened the final presentation. Witcover created the above scenario to use this negative energy in a positive way. The results served the production well.⁹

In order to further bring the ladies together, Gabriele had the final piece, "Alleluja," part of the motet, "Exsultate jubilate" rewritten as a work for five voices. As the five women sang the piece, they revealed a bust of Mozart. This particular bit of staging came to Witcover from his memory of an "Hommage a Molière" at the Comédie-Française, a yearly ceremony in which a bust of Molière is revealed on the stage. Witcover was careful to dress the women in gowns that were beautiful but not specifically related to any period, to create a feeling of timelessness. This particular moment, the finale of the production, was described by Norman Rosten as a

8. The description of the production, rehearsal process and the incident described above are from an interview with Peter Schlosser on December 30, 1978. The note from the spectator is not on file at Masterworks Laboratory Theatre.

9. From an interview with Walt Witcover on May 6, 1981.

"delicious theatrical curtain."¹⁰

Witcover had developed more security with this series of experiments and was more able to face potential criticism. Among others, he invited Norman Rosten who was generally kind to Masterworks Laboratory Theatre. The review praises the production:

Mozart as Dramatist - a presentation by the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre. Conceived and directed by Walt Witcover. At the Spencer Memorial Church, Clinton & Remsen Streets.

What is it? An evening of music? Or Drama? It's each, and both, and something new. For, along with Mozart's glorious music (mostly arias from his operas), we have a delightful experience as theatre. My advice to all you culture seekers is: get to the Church for the remaining two performances (Wed. and Fri. 7:30 p.m.). It may be some time before this brand of entertainment comes our way [again].

Walt Witcover, the director has decided that Mozart can be fun. He has assembled a cast of singer/actors who are not intimidated by the classical idea--they have in fact, under his guidance, moved the classics out of the 18th Century and into the 20th. There are some funny surprises. The letter may look different, but the spirit is intact.¹¹

Rosten went on to describe Witcover's staging of the scenes from Don Giovanni as wonderful slapstick. Claiming that nothing was impossible for the imaginative director, he found the Così Fan Tutte scenes done with lyricism and wit. Rosten complimented Witcover for pre-

10. Norman Rosten, "Rosten on Mozart: Masterworks Lab Has Good Show at Spencer," The Brooklyn Heights Press, May 31, 1973, p. 3.

11. Ibid.

senting a new idea of musical theatre; for shaking up the old concepts and putting them into new perspective. However, he noted that the music was presented as written, note by note, and sung well.

Peter Davis also wrote a review in The New York Times, May 29, 1973. It follows:

Mozart's operas resist the hand of the "inventive" stage director more than most, probably because Mozart not only knew what he wanted in terms of words and music, but also achieved it with a specificity that other composers rarely matched. Undaunted, the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre undertook to update and revamp scenes from Mozart's operas . . . in a program conceived and directed by Walt Witcover.

Some of it worked, and some of it didn't. Mozart clearly planned "Deh, vieni, non tardar" as a moment of pure lyric repose in the hectic last act of "Figaro," not as a slow strip for Susanna with Figaro lurking in the bushes munching on a turkey leg. Also Mr. Witcover presented Don Giovanni as a scruffy motorcycle hippie, contradicting the musical character of this suave, aristocratic sensualist at every turn.¹²

Davis felt the Letter Duet from Figaro was subtly managed as Susanna and the Countess gradually changed their roles of maid and mistress. He said the frantic cinematic sequence from Don Giovanni had a lively zaniness reminiscent of the Marx brothers. However, Davis found the principal performers more adept at acting than singing. While he appreciated the attempt by Witcover and the group to revitalize opera, he felt Masterworks

12. Peter G. Davis, "Music: Mozart Updated," The New York Times, May 29, 1973, p. 29.

Laboratory Theatre had made a mistake in choosing Mozart, as there were other composers who needed freshening up even more.

And Albert Bermel wrote in The New Leader:

If current theatre draws from time to time on opera, rock concerts and song recitals for its inspiration, the staging of opera has (thank Heaven) lifted many ideas out of theater's bag of tricks in recent years, and Walt Witcover is probably the reason why. Some years ago in this column I reviewed his workshop production of La Traviata. He has now moved from Verdi to Mozart as Dramatist, a varied miscellany of scenes and arias from The Marriage of Figaro, Così fan tutte, Don Giovanni, and The Magic Flute, rekindled by his Masterworks Laboratory Theater at the beautiful Spencer Memorial Church in Brooklyn Heights.

Amid rearranged pews, stained glass (including one superb blue rose window), and a high-vaulted roof, a tremendous playing area has been opened up to accommodate this modern-in-Gothic revival of Classical art. Witcover's operating principle seems to be that a singer is a whole body, not mere lungs, lips, and hysterical eyes, while a libretto is a life, not simply a plot structure with pauses for sensation identification.

If the arias sound glorious, they do on recordings, too. You go to the MLT to watch the music. (A number of recognizable theater people did exactly that the night I was there. One was taking notes.) As it happens, the company can boast at least two genuine voices, one soprano and one bass, plus a general level of singing and vocal arrangement that ought to arouse the envy of any self-respecting opera company.

But these singers can also act and clown; Mozart does not intimidate them. In the rendition of Così the two soubrettes, Fiordiligi and Dorabella, marooned just off the coast of Long Island, maneuver a sailboat across the floor (don't ask me how) without losing their pitch or tempo. Papageno sings his bird catcher lyric from The Magic Flute as he pedals his bicycle and hurls bags of popcorn at the customers. Don Giovanni's Zerlina invites Massetto to beat her for her sins, backing up the invitation

by offering him in turn a chair leg, an umbrella, a leather belt, and a bathroom pump. She finally appeases him with a plate of Rice Krispies, milk and a ton of sugar. A lady in front of me who was savoring this scene more than she dared to admit wondered aloud, "What would Mozart say?" My guess is: "Encore."¹³

Lovelives

In June 1974, the group presented a "Staging of Song Cycles" entitled Lovelives. Some of the material had been performed in earlier productions of the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre. Except for selections of Weill, Gershwin, Kern, and Porter, the material chosen was originally written for performance in concert and not as part of a dramatic opera or musical comedy. Thus Witcover and the performers were able to create original dramatic formats for these songs. This also precluded any possible criticism from the audience who might have preconceived ideas about how selections from operas and musicals should be staged. Again the production was to be the result of exercises, the goal of which was to show the developmental kind of work actors, singers, and directors might engage in to enrich the musical theatre. Lovelives was not intended to be a finished production, but merely a work in progress, and for this reason, Witcover avoided inviting critics or reviewers. Unfor-

13. Albert Bermel, "On Stage: Hoss Opera and Mozart," The New Leader, June 25, 1973, p. 23.

tunately, Allen Hughes took it upon himself to review the show for The New York Times.

As was the custom, the musical selections had been used as acting exercises in Witcover's classes. The actors-singers were encouraged to be experimental and daring in their approach to these exercises, allowing their instincts to carry them into new and unusual concepts of the material. For each selection, the students were asked to create a dramatic situation with a beginning, middle, and end. However, Witcover did insist that the scenarios or plots thus developed be logical and in keeping with the emotional content of the music. In order to make the musical selections meaningful and personal to the performer, he also demanded that the resulting scene reflect or in some way have bearing upon the real life conflicts and problems of the said performer. Witcover wanted to explore how far this highly subjective approach could be used in creating new and vivid theatrical events, at the same time being faithful to the intentions of the composer. After months in class, Witcover chose the selections that were to be offered to the public in Lovelives.

The unifying theme for the production came from Witcover. He insisted that the material selected and the scenario created for it have some direct and real relationship to the past or present life circumstances

of the performer.

Helen Trowbridge re-created the piece she had built around Frauenliebe und Leben of Robert Schumann, originally performed in Experiments in Lyric Theatre, 1970.¹⁴ This scenario followed a situation close to her actual real-life experience. Kitty Muldoon sang material of Jerome Kern and Cole Porter. Her scenario traced the downfall of a singer into prostitution. While highly exaggerated and a bit melodramatic, the scenario had its source in real life. Muldoon had been a band singer before her marriage and her observations of the world surrounding cabarets, nightclubs, and bars served as an inspiration for the scenario. Gayle Swymer sang songs of Kurt Weill. Leyna Gabriele also chose material that touched upon her own personal life. On February 2, 1978, Gabriele discussed the program. She very specifically described the work process with which she prepared the songs by Richard Strauss, "The Four Last Songs"--Vier Letzte Lieder.

These concert songs are, in reality, not connected thematically. They are not all written by the same poet. The first three, Frühling, Spring; September, and Beim Schlafengehn, Time to Sleep, were written by Herman Hesse while Im Abendrot, At Dusk, was written by Joseph von

14. The reader will find a description of the results earlier in this chapter.

Eichdorff. The works, however, are traditionally sung together as a cycle. Gabriele said:

With them, I was not obligated to any scene or text or tradition that I might have been with an opera aria. This left me free to search for an avenue of physical life that could be expressed on the stage--that would express my inner emotions. The first song, "Spring," seemed to suggest rebirth, a new spring to me. While I understood how Richard Strauss could write it at the end of his life I myself could not find a metaphor for the song which I could then turn into something playable on the stage. I translated the songs and listened to them time and time again over a period of weeks. It was the song "September" that gave me a clue. I find the song bittersweet so I examined my own life to find something in it that was at once bitter-sweet and yet powerful enough to move me on the stage. It was my music. I was growing older, not really singing, not even studying or working with a voice teacher. I found the situation a metaphor. The situation would be built around my suddenly having a new opportunity. A contract arrives in the mail. Of course this was too much for one song, "September." In class with Walt Witcover, I gradually built this situation into a piece with a beginning, middle, and end that served as a background for the four songs. The opportunity itself is presented to me during the "Spring" song and my indecision and insecurity is revealed during the "September" song. The metaphoric choice for the song, "Time to Sleep" was difficult. I felt, of course, that "I did have to sleep on it," (my decision about my career) but going to sleep did not serve the situation on the stage. However, when we can't deal with a situation in life, we sometimes go on to another activity--something else. I looked for that something else and I wanted it to be tranquil activity in keeping with the song. I found it. I went into my indoor garden and cared for my plants during this interlude. In the last song, "At Dusk," I made the decision not to take the opportunity, not to sign the contract. The song concerns itself with Death and in my piece, Death became a symbol of my not functioning as an artist. However, the last measures of the song "At Dusk" end in a major key; they are gay and positive. I had to find something that would work for this. I found it--my teaching. During these

last measures I gave a box containing my costumes and accessories to a younger sister. This actively symbolized my teaching and became a positive expression of the continuum in life and art.

This playlet or scene that I constructed had activities that centered around my decision whether to take this opportunity to sing or not. I dealt with the contract, clippings, my old wigs and mementoes of the theatre, etc. All of this was built in a very logical and clear way so that it developed into a physical life that expressed the emotions I was feeling. The physical life or reality thus created also helped me to feel and express emotion on the stage without pushing. The physical life I created fed my emotional life.

. . . I want to stress that this was an experiment--an exercise in a method of work, in a way of preparing material. It should be seen as a work process. Soon, in March 1979, I will be doing these songs in concert. Of course, I will not do any of these physical activities. However, my reality will be grounded in this process. I will rehearse my songs going through these activities. Thus, when I perform them in concert, the emotional life will be there. The audience does not have to know what I am thinking, as long as the emotional life serves the material--and I believe the results will serve Strauss's songs.¹⁵

On May 10, 1981, Witcover spoke about the production:

I went very far with this experiment. I played with space. We created a multi-leveled stage in order to allow a free flow of action . . . like in cinema. I tried to avoid operatic material so the audience wouldn't be upset by what we were doing but I bent the rule when I helped Gayle Swymer select material. When I started to put Lovelives together, Gayle had given up performing. I had always been excited by her talent and went to her studio where she teaches and persuaded her to perform again. The scenario we built together around the Weill songs was very dramatic and extravagant because I wanted to push Gayle as far as

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15. From an interview with Leyna Gabriele on February 2, 1979.

I could . . . to show her what a capable performer she is . . . the fact that the material of the production was geared to the performers is part of our "process." The results came from our collaborative effort and should be judged not on the scenarios we created but by whether or not we achieved our goals . . . to bring a new and vivid life to musical material and to demonstrate our work "process."¹⁶

Allen Hughes, the uninvited guest, panned the production.

Given the variety of worthy projects that might suggest themselves to those who want to do something different in musical theater, it is difficult to understand why anyone would choose to make soap operas out of songs by Schumann and Wolf, but that, alas, is what the Masterworks Laboratory Theater adopted as its most recent project.

The results are on view at the Spencer Memorial Church in Brooklyn Heights under the title "Lovelives". Schumann's "Frauenliebe und Leben" tells the dreary story of a secretary who falls in love with her boss, puts away her teddy bear, marries the boss, has a baby and is then widowed. Eight songs by Wolf tell of a woman who falls in love with, is betrayed by, and then takes back an oaf.¹⁷

Hughes described the medley of songs by Gershwin, Kern, and Porter that began with "The Man I Love" and ended with "Love For Sale" as documenting the downhill slide of a cabaret singer from a class establishment to a dive and prostitution.

He found the interpretations of early Italian love songs and Kurt Weill songs banal. Hughes claimed he

16. From an interview with Walt Witcover on May 10, 1981.

17. Allen Hughes, "Music: Love Medleys," The New York Times, June 15, 1974, p. 18.

left the theatre because he didn't have the courage to stay and see what would happen between the mailman and the opera singer in the drama of Strauss's "Four Last Songs." He felt it would be more charitable to let the performers remain anonymous in his review.

Commenting on the review, Terry Walker, who served as Associate Director on the project, stated:

Basically Hughes is a music critic. I don't think he understood the thrust of our work--that it was an exposition of the kind of developmental work singers can do when working on a musical piece. The problem is that the actor-singers created their own stories or plots and the playwriting in this kind of work is weak. It's like putting on a performance built around improvisations coming out of acting class.

Walt Witcover tried to tie these pieces together under the title Lovelives but there was no true unifying "spine" for the whole production--there was no overall vision to it.

From the point of view of the physical production, we had problems, too. The individual performers required certain pieces of furniture and properties that were cumbersome. We had heavy pieces of furniture to deal with and complicated set changes. None of this was worked out in terms of an overall concept as Walt had done in Salon-Comédie. The set changes retarded the flow of the production . . . in some cases I questioned the approach. Hughes criticizes the scenario built around the Gershwin, Kern, Porter songs which tell of a cabaret singer falling into prostitution. I tend to agree. I've seen Kitty Muldoon sing these songs just standing next to a piano--doing nothing--and they are just as effective as when she created a whole story.¹⁸

18. From an interview with Terry Walker on January 10, 1979.

CHAPTER XI
AN OPERATIC WORK

The Gondoliers

In October, 1975, Masterworks Laboratory Theatre presented The Gondoliers of Gilbert and Sullivan, directed by Walt Witcover.

The genesis for the production goes back to the late 1960s, during the time of the La Traviata experiment. At that time, Witcover became intrigued with the special challenges of light opera or operetta. In an interview on January 28, 1979, he described the chief difficulty:

In operetta you have to justify moving from speech to song and back again. It is not like opera where everything is sung or drama where everything is spoken. In modern musical comedy there is preparation built into the script. For example, a musical theme will begin as background to the dialogue until the point at which the actors break into song. Rogers and Hammerstein do it well. It is a convention we have come to accept--but the problem of this change in light opera is a bit more difficult to resolve. I saw Gilbert and Sullivan as a challenge. I wanted to attempt to express the subtext of their music in dramatic terms; to justify the changes from spoken dialogue to song and back again; and to bring out the character, situation, and story values inherent in the scores.¹

Actually, it was during a trip to Venice in 1970

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1. From an interview with Walt Witcover on January 28, 1979.

that Witcover became intrigued with doing The Gondoliers of Gilbert and Sullivan as an experiment in light opera. Exploring the various campi of Venice, he realized that The Gondoliers should not take place in the most frequented public piazza of the city but rather in a place off the beaten track; a campo in a working class neighborhood. He said:

These kids in The Gondoliers are of the servant class. They are like our taxi drivers and waitresses. In New York, they would live in the East Village or Hell's Kitchen--so I looked for places like that in Venice.²

Witcover was also impressed with how the city had grown up vertically because space was at a premium, and how people lived on top of one another. He felt he wanted to do a production of the piece with a set that would express this feeling. After four years of thinking about it and assigning scenes from the production to his directing students, he felt ready to stage The Gondoliers. His overall artistic aim was to emphasize the wit and satire of W. S. Gilbert. To that end, he sought a contemporary approach to reveal the timelessness and relevance of the fable. In an attempt to parody the corruption and hypocrisy of the older, established generation, as well as the self-deceiving ideals of the younger generation with the full social and psychological rele-

2. From an interview with Walt Witcover, January 22, 1979.

vance the authors originally intended, certain liberties were taken with the text to bring it up to date and make it more alive and vital. It was presented as a topical satire. It dealt with "flower children," student take-overs, Watergate, political chicanery, and influence peddling, interracial romance, and finally homosexual marriage--themes pertinent to an audience of the mid-seventies.

A real revival is to do in modern terms what the author intended. I felt I approached in today's terms the romantic comedy and satire Gilbert intended.³

In Act I of the libretto, set in Venice, two gondoliers, Marco and Giuseppe Palmieri, are married to Gianetta and Tessa respectively, while Casilda, the daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Plaza-Toro is secretly in love with Luiz, her father's attendant. Don Alhambra del Bolero, the Grand Inquisitor, arrives to reveal that many years earlier he had stolen the infant Prince of Barataria and given him to Inez, a local woman, to rear. The infant had been promised in marriage to Casilda of Plaza-Toro. As it is believed that either Marco or Giuseppe is the long-lost prince, one of the marriages of the Palmieris will have to be annulled. The Palmieris are sent off to rule the island of Barataria together, until Inez, the Prince's foster-mother can be located to

3. Ibid.

recognize the real prince. Sadly, Marco and Giuseppe leave Gianetta and Tessa.

In Act II, on the island of Barataria, Gianetta and Tessa arrive to find that Marco and Giuseppe have turned the kingdom into a nonsensical democracy. The others, too, the Duke and Duchess, Casilda, Luiz, and the Grand Inquisitor, appear on this topsy-turvy island. After much confusion, Inez finally appears. She recognizes Luiz as her long-lost foster-child, the Prince of Barataria. Thus Luiz and Casilda will be married and the marriages of Marco and Gianetta and Giuseppe and Tessa are saved. As all the lovers are reunited the piece ends on a happy note.

The Masterworks Laboratory Theatre's production of The Gondoliers is an example of how a script was rewritten during the rehearsal period. The changes that occurred in the text came out of the rehearsal improvisations. Witcover's only intention was to be true to the spirit of Gilbert and Sullivan. At the onset of rehearsals, he claims not to have had any preconception of how he would change the text. The only goal was to make the rather arbitrary events of the piece, such as the marriage of the gondoliers, Marco and Giuseppe, which occurs at the beginning of the play, seem logical and motivated. To this end, the first step was to type up the text without any of the stage directions inherited

from the D'Oyly Carte. Having witnessed other productions of The Gondoliers, the D'Oyly Carte's included, Witcover found them old-fashioned and lifeless. He also wanted to make the musical selections which are so overwhelmingly present in the work seem as if they were written to accompany the action and not just present for the actors to sing without real motivation. In traditional productions of Gilbert and Sullivan, the actors usually come down stage and sing the songs to the audience as if the musical events were isolated from the rest of the performance. The goal was to present the work as a whole, a happening, not a piece that seemed directed and rehearsed, with a cast that behaved like human beings in real dilemmas, not the conventional "operatic dolls" or so-called "satiric types," so that the audience would truly become involved in the predicaments and concerns of the characters.

Witcover's first decision was to dress the performers in modern clothes. From his experience with La Traviata, Witcover learned that modern dress made it easier for the actors-singers to feel at ease in their roles. Period costumes tend to intimidate all but the most experienced performers, often leading them into stage behavior that is erroneous, a notion of period style believed to represent a manner of acting from the past. Witcover hoped that eliminating "hoop skirts"

would help the performers behave like authentic human beings on the stage, rather than cardboard stage characters. No doubt the budget was also a consideration in that costumes of the kind used by the D'Oyly Carte were too expensive to rent or build.

In order to help the actors find a modern personal parallel for the piece and ultimately play The Gondoliers realistically, an approach using many theatre games was followed.⁴ These games began at the audition stage. As Witcover did not have enough young singers in his classes, nor in the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre group, he held open casting. Lenore Fuerstman who was studying with him at the time and ultimately became the chorus leader in The Gondoliers described these auditions in an interview.⁵ While she was singing, Witcover threw pillows at her, moved objects and furniture, and finally pulled her and pushed her around the room. During this exercise, he wanted those auditioning to keep singing while at the same time, logically react to what was taking place. Fuerstman also recalled in part the rehearsals which lasted from October 1974 to October 1975.

4. From an interview with Walt Witcover on February 20, 1981.

5. From an interview with Lenore Fuerstman on February 27, 1981.

The first rehearsal was the only one in which the whole cast gathered together until the last weeks of rehearsal. The rationale for this was that there are two distinct groups of people in the piece: the gondoliers or street folk, and the royals, the Duke, Duchess, and Don Alhambra, the Grand Inquisitor. As these groups do not really know each other before The Gondoliers begins, Witcover decided to keep them apart during rehearsals to see how this would affect the future relationships of the two groups.

At the first rehearsal, Witcover sought to create a feeling of equality among all; principals and chorus alike. To this end, the cast sat in a circle and asked the person next to them who they were. Most of the rehearsal was spent trying to build mutual respect and trust among a group of people who hardly knew each other. After this "Kaffee Klatsch" there was a reading of the text. Later in the rehearsal, the chorus members were asked to think about individual names for the characters they were to become and life lines or backgrounds for their characters. Fuerstman recognized that the first rehearsal really started a company feeling and broke down any fears the less experienced members of the group might have had. She also felt that the actors began to appreciate each other as people. The idea that each member of the chorus became an individual was also appealing because in the

text, the chorus members are really nonentities. The first rehearsal was the first step toward building an ensemble.

Thereafter the acting rehearsals and the singing rehearsals were separate. Gayle Swymer, assisting Witcover, managed the music rehearsals, to help the cast learn the music and feel comfortable with it. It was hoped that the music would become second nature to the actors-singers before any real staging of the piece took place so that the performers would not be distracted by learning the music and, therefore, would be able to concentrate better on the acting during the last phases of the rehearsals. The second rehearsal with Witcover for those playing the gondolieri was like a talent show. Everyone was asked to do something. However, they could not perform their specialties. Fuerstman, a trained and experienced singer, did a clog dance and an imitation of Madeline Kahn doing Marlene Dietrich. Vilma Vaccaro (Gianetta) played the guitar, and Michael Hume (Marco) did mime. This also helped Witcover find ideas and possibilities for staging the piece using the latent abilities of his cast. During the third rehearsal the gondolieri were broken down into groups. When the text was explored, the cast read the songs for acting clues only; they never sang in these non-musical rehearsals.

The rehearsals continued on Saturdays, Sundays, and two nights a week. Fuerstman describes the early

work sessions as a kindergarten. The actors always had lots of toys and objects to play with. Often each line of the text would be read by a different actor. At every rehearsal, the cast would talk about the script and analyze each line. The homework of the actors was to do research on the period in which the piece was written, the life of Venice in which the piece is set, and work on the meaning of the British dialogue of the text. In this way, and because of the lack of time pressure, the cast came to discover and learn the script rather than memorize the lines. After the first few rehearsals, the cast were always on their feet playing with the toys and objects supplied to them and constantly improvising their prior relationships and daily lives. The improvisations were never on the events of the text; no "etudes" were acted on the situation in the play. Witcover encouraged paraphrasing in an attempt to break down the inhibitions among some of the actors resulting from the semi-classical language of the play. Gradually the language of Gilbert and Sullivan became natural to the actors. The gondolieri and other cast members were asked to set up the daily lives of their characters, and to bring in personal objects that would help them. Work stations were created by the actors. They had to imagine and build their own houses in a given space in the rehearsal studio. As mime is a skill unto itself, and takes

great energy and concentration, it was not allowed. The actors had to use authentic objects and accomplish real tasks at every rehearsal. At all times they were allowed to explore their relationships with each other. In effect, they were being led into an exploration of the life under the surface of the text, and doing their own creative work rather than being told what to do. To achieve a particular goal, Witcover would often participate in the improvisations, changing the course of events. He never arbitrarily gave results to the actors but manipulated them toward the effect he wished to create. Maintaining a low profile, Witcover began to shape the piece. He began to have the cast improvise on themes and situations related to the condition and protests of the 1960s. Witcover admits now that the idea of making the Duke and Duchess a WASP couple, part of the fading Southern aristocracy, came to him early in the rehearsals. He never mentioned the idea to his cast but led them into discovering it themselves. Often ideas found in these rehearsals were discarded later. The cast began to emerge as a solid ensemble. The actors of the chorus who chose their own common Italian names began to address each other with these names outside of rehearsal as well. Gradually even the principals began playing the same game. Witcover often provoked the actors, forcing them to ask questions about what they were doing in an attempt to

stimulate their imaginations. While Witcover obviously had a concept already formed when he cast a black, David Pendleton, as Luiz, the servant of the Duke and Duchess who was to become the King of Barataria, and marry Casilda, the daughter of the Duke and Duchess, the full effect of this on the text gradually emerged. Another idea, introducing a Japanese tourist into the piece, had its genesis in a textual detail. During the first few minutes of the play, the text suddenly changes from English to Italian.⁶ This movement from one language to another interested Witcover and puzzled the cast. Through a series of improvisations it was decided that the gondolieri and their neighbors earned their livelihoods by catering to tourists. The women in this production of the play made handicrafts and sold them to the foreigners. Of course, like any natives catering to tourists, they were all essentially con men. They were "picture postcard contadini and Venetians." Therefore, when a tourist arrived on the scene, they did their best to create the picturesque Venice the tourist was expecting. The Italian in the text became an expression of their "tourist behavior." As the Japanese people became frequent tourists to Europe in the 60s and 70s, this idea added to the fun while also making a contemporary statement.

6. W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, The Gondoliers, Act I (London: Chappell & Co., 1911), pp. 4, 5.

Another major event in the text that had to be justified was the marriages of Marco and Giuseppe Palmieri very early in the play. In the text it appeared that Tessa and Gianetta became their brides by hazard. However, Witcover had an elaborate scheme in mind to make it appear a logical and unavoidable result of what had gone on prior to the opening of the play. Again, while Witcover claims not to have had any real preconception before launching rehearsals, he cast a male in the role of Tessa, thereby making Giuseppe and Tessa homosexuals. Witcover stated:

After all, you can always see a standard production of The Gondoliers anywhere at any time.⁷

Thus, the production did not adhere to the given circumstances of the piece as written, and the rewriting began. However, Witcover feels that he was faithful to the sense he found in the music and the nonsense in the text. Other images and changes came through improvisation. It was decided that Gianetta was pregnant with Marco's child and that Tessa conspired to prevent her (Gianetta) from leaving and to have Marco marry her (Gianetta) as well as having Giuseppe marry him (Tessa). A game of blindfold at the onset of the play was but a ruse to achieve these goals. To make it seem acceptable to a modern

7. Witcover, interview.

audience, a prologue was evolved. It was presented as a slide show which became the exposition in lieu of the traditional way of conveying the information with words. Without text and with the overture in the background, the prior life of these characters was enacted for the spectators with photographs. This device made the early events of the play seem less arbitrary and more logical.

Bit by bit the production began to take a shape that was unlike any other production of The Gondoliers. Instead of old-fashioned frivolity, the piece became one of modern absurdity.

Vilma Vaccaro, in an interview on February 27, 1981, also helped reconstruct some of the rehearsals:

Witcover always told the cast what they would be working on during the next rehearsal. When it became time to work out the wedding scene, he told the cast to bring in decorations for a wedding party and honeymoon sendoff. The actors went home, thought it over, and returned to the rehearsal at which a spontaneous wedding seemed to happen. Much of the resulting action was incorporated into the final staging of the piece.⁸

She described the evolution of another bit of staging in Act II.

At this point in the text, Tessa and the obviously pregnant Gianetta have arrived on the island Kingdom of Barataria, believing that either Marco or Giuseppe will be revealed as King and that one was married in infancy to the daughter of the Duke and Duchess, Casilda. The quartet deals with this dilemma. During the rehearsals it became apparent to us four principals and Walt that this could

8. From an interview with Vilma Vaccaro on February 27, 1981.

really be treated as an intimate family quarrel. However, to avoid any suggestions of sexuality which seemed inappropriate for the piece, the idea of setting the quartet in a bedroom was ruled out. Walt called a rehearsal at his apartment. In exploring the events preceding this quartet in the play (the flow of the day), it seemed logical that we would be hungry at this point. As it was near lunch time, we did an improvisation in Witcover's kitchen which seemed to work. A kitchen is a "homey" place where an intimate family quarrel could readily take place. For several rehearsals, we explored this idea, using all the pots, pans, and other objects found in a kitchen to express the inner text they had each developed. Once we began to function this way, the music seemed to lend itself to the outer action of setting a table. We continued to work on the text, moving into improvisation and back again to the text. All these rehearsals continued to take place in Witcover's kitchen. Eventually the activities discovered in the improvisations were choreographed to the music and set so that the use of food and objects truly underscored the text. Walt was very strict about the choreography. Once it was set, he expected the same actions on the same beats of the music every time thereafter.⁹

It is not difficult to see how Witcover's approach can lead to textual changes in a play. Once the Duke and Duchess became Lieutenant Colonel "Daddy" Duke and Matilda "Duchess" Duke, the script had to be rewritten. One day Sy Travers, who was playing Don Alhambra, brought a rubber mask of Henry Kissinger to rehearsal, which was later used in the production. His character became a former Grand Inquisitor, a mockery of Kissinger so popular in 1975. Casting Irwin Pearl in the role of Tessa obviously changed certain musical values in the piece. The question is not

9. Ibid. (The scene is on page 36 of the text.)

whether or not Witcover (or other directors) should or should not be allowed to rewrite a text but in what respects the production achieved the goals as set by the director.

Lenore Fuerstman generally found The Gondoliers exciting to work in, although recognizing its flaws.

Walt trains you in acting class not to be concerned with looks; that the appearance of actors is not important. Yet, when casting he is very concerned about the look of the production. He searches for a look; he type-casts. He wanted a young cast; one that was attractive. He wanted the four principals to be vivid . . . We went on too long with the improvisations, with the rehearsals. Some of the cast could not work this way. They reached a performance peak in rehearsal and from then on it was the law of diminishing returns . . . The production was very busy. There was too much emphasis on props and objects.¹⁰

Perhaps the following reviews and resulting controversy will shed more light on the subject.

The following is from Edward Moran's review in Phoenix Magazine:

. . . As with any revival, there's the ever-present need to present a fresh, modern interpretation while somehow maintaining the flavor and vitality of the original. With Gilbert & Sullivan operettas, attention must be paid to the bantering commentary on Victorian mores which, for all our touted liberation, resemble those of our age and of all ages in many ways. This production may depart from the letter of the original text, but it never wanders from its spirit.

JUST AS THE ORIGINAL VERSION WRITTEN IN 1889* mocked the grandeur and opulence of its time

10. Lenore Fuerstman, interview.

* The type face is the newspaper's.

(the operetta was set amidst the rococo trappings of 1750), the Masterworks version burlesques American frivolities with obvious glee.¹¹

Moran described the Duke and Duchess as two red-neck members of the southern "aristocracy." Luiz, their faithful servant (and future King) as a mild-mannered valet, servile and black. Tessa, one of the gondolier's wives was played by a young man, adding a soupçon of gaiety to the famous ménage à six. Tourists, TV cameramen, airport interviews, and press agents were as much a part of Witcover's Venice as the gondoliers and Grand Inquisitors. Moran added that even with these concessions to contemporary life, the production kept its distance, and that its charm and delicate balance made the production appealing.

Moran complimented Stuart Wurtzel's complicated set, which evoked a whole world along the Grand Canal, a world of shops and cafes and tiny apartments teeming with life and song. Gondolas plied the aisles, a blimp appeared in the sky, a submarine made its way into the Venetian waters. Even if the words were unspoken and the songs unsung, one would find himself saying "Shh," and smiling. He felt that the character development ran only skin deep, but in entertainment of this sort,

11. Edward Moran, "Music and Theatre, Masterworks 'Gondoliers': Upbeat Update of a Classic," the Phoenix Magazine Section, October 30, 1975, p. 11.

spectacle was of the first order, and here, in his opinion, it was of the first magnitude.

The following is a review by Bill Zakariasen of The New York Daily News:

Perhaps no niche of the musical theater is so encrusted with "tradition" as Gilbert & Sullivan's canon of operettas, though Rogers & Hammerstein come close. The Masterworks Library [sic] Theater (now playing at Brooklyn's Spencer Memorial Church), realizing G&S satirized contemporary mores, has re-set "The Gondoliers" in the post-Watergate era. The idea is intriguing and the production is very good though the execution of both leaves something to be desired.

The music is played straight, but the book is gaily revamped in more ways than one. Tessa, the object of one of the gondoliers' affections, is played by a young man. One wonders what G&S would have thought of a prenuptial tumble in the hay between these two gentlemen (visible through much of Act I), to say nothing of the strange musical balances caused by the sexual switch.¹²

Zakariasen found the promised contemporary political satire rather mild, extending mainly to the Duke of Plaza-Toro having a George Wallace accent and the Grand Inquisitor being disguised as Henry Kissinger. The chorus largely made up of flower children did not smoke. He felt the physical production and multi-level set by Walt Witcover was a joy and the arrival of characters in airplanes and submarines got well-deserved applause. He called the singing by most of the cast adequate and the acting enthusiastic but complained that the hidden or-

12. Bill Zakariasen, "Gondoliering Beyond Watergate," The New York Daily News, November 3, 1975, p. 85. Note that he calls the group, Masterworks Library Theater.

chestra was too far away from the performers to guarantee musical precision and that many performers were far too slow in timing their lines.

In The Brooklyn Heights Press, Norman Rosten wrote:

. . . This is a workshop production. Those who like the slick Broadway article can take the train uptown; those who enjoy youth, energy, and improvisation will find this evening on the Heights more than worthwhile. It comes out as G&S edited, added to, re-interpreted and jazzed up with media effects and modernisms which would have appalled Victorian England at the turn of the century--the heyday of Mistery Gilbert and Sullivan.¹³

Rosten thought that the production would upset the current conventional methods of doing these intimate little musical plays. Calling it a mix of the total ingredients of musical theatre; a bit untidy, but never dull, he said that Witcover had a marvelous visual sense and his (Rosten's) eyes reveled in what his ears may have missed: from the zany film clips to the airplane and TV camera. One was in the land of comic invention so dear to the hearts of these actors and technicians.

He went on to describe the roomy set (several tiers with innumerable cubicles and staircases) in which the actors could invent, dance, don costumes, or ride a gondola. On the subject of the acting, he cited Sy

13. Norman Rosten, "MTL on Remsen: A Neighborhood Frolic," The Brooklyn Heights Press, November 6, 1975, p. 7.

Travers as the perfect combination of menace and vocal clarity; Maurice Blanc and Margaret Goodman as a cool Duke and Duchess; the sets of lovers, Charles White-side, Michael Hume, Vilma Vaccaro, and Irwin Pearl, and finally, the missing husband, played by David Pendleton. Lovers of the theatre who revel in the workshop spirit were urged to come forth in support of this neighborhood frolic: single or en masse. He called the group engaging and said they belonged rightfully in the madcap world of Gilbert and Sullivan.

Alan Rich wrote a very negative review in New York Magazine, which provoked a telling response from Leyna Gabriele.

. . . The Gondoliers, being done for the next several weekends at the Spencer Memorial Church in Brooklyn Heights by the Masterworks Laboratory Theater is an abomination. One of the two couples has been transformed into boy-and-boy, and that is the least of a long list of transgressions. The milieu has been changed to a Venetian hippie-land; at one point some gondoliers roll a tourist; the Grand Inquisitor becomes a Latin guerrilla, etc.--all to Sullivan's elegant old fashioned music, which suffers further indignities in often being made to stop in mid-cadence to accommodate an anachronistic, meaningless business. Walt Witcover, whose dossier includes similar havoc wrought upon La Traviata and several Mozart operas, herein sentences himself to something lingering, with boiling oil.¹⁴

14. Alan Rich, "Singers Sweet, Singers Sour," New York Magazine, November 10, 1975, p. 84.

Gabriele letter:

November 4, 1975

Mr. Alan Rich
New York Magazine
755 Second Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10017

Dear Mr. Rich,

I have just read your review of MLT's production of "The Gondoliers." You most certainly have the right to dislike the production and as a critic are constrained to express your views.

However, how can you presume to criticize Mr. Witcover's productions of "La Traviata" and "Mozart" when you have never seen them? That is hitting below the belt in a most reprehensible way. I find it irresponsible and unconscionable that a critic for a prestigious magazine like NEW YORK would attack performances he has never seen.

I might add that the "Traviata" which you dismiss with such disdain was Frank Corsaro's inspiration for his highly acclaimed New York City Opera production of a few seasons back. The specific directorial touches which critics enthused over were lifted right out of our production at the Actors' Studio which Mr. Corsaro saw.

Another point that amazes me is that even though Mr. Witcover's concept was distasteful to you, you, as a "music" critic, did not recognize that so much of the stage action clearly expressed the drama in the music. For a change, the audience could "see" as well as "hear" the drama.

Mr. Witcover is the only director I know who faces and tries to solve the problem of finding dramatic justifications for the music. He questions every musical nuance and tries to find human behavior and action for the singers that expresses the drama of the music, as if they themselves were causing the music to be written at that moment. His aim also was to find logical reasons to go from speech to song.

Mr. Felsenstein put it this way: . . . "that everyone taking part in a performance is concerned with something so unspeakably significant and moving that he can communicate in no fashion other than singing." Had you stayed for the

second act, you would have seen this fully and beautifully realized in the quartet, "In a contemplative fashion". In our Laboratory Theatre, we are at least trying, and very often we succeed.

Even a strong traditionalist should have the grace to recognize that no music considered "classic" should be called "old fashioned"; and if we accept the anachronisms of Mozart's 18th century music in a 16th century Spanish setting or Verdi's 19th century Italian music in medieval Scotland, why can't a contemporary stage director set a play in any time that might enhance its relevance? Is "The Gondoliers" less relevant or more relevant because the book, the characters, and the music are so "un-Italian"?

As for "indignities" to the music--I suggest that you re-examine your "Gondoliers" score. Mr. Witcover, who is an accomplished musician, could never be so gross as to stop the music in mid-cadence. He did make full use of "fermata" indicated by the composer for dramatic events--quite different from stopping in mid-cadence. Another irresponsible criticism. In future, I advise you to make such observations from a little better knowledge of the music.

Also I wish you had been specific in your review about the "meaningless" business. All the stage action I saw was particularly meaningful and illuminated the humanness of every character on stage. Or do you think the phoney, mannered, clichéd imitations of the so-called Gilbert and Sullivan "traditional style" is more "meaningful"? I submit that in blindly accepting the conventional images of characters usually seen on stage in lyric theatre, you really don't know how to react to real people on stage.

Unfortunately, because of such narrow, closed, archaic attitudes towards the staging of opera, its inevitable end in museums is almost a certainty. What a pity!

Very truly yours,
Leyna Gabriele
Co-founder of Masterworks
Laboratory Theatre

Copy to Clay S. Felker, Editor.¹⁵

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15. The date of Gabriele's letter is correct. She actually wrote it on November 4, 1975, as *New York Magazine* is circulated to its subscription holders one week earlier than date on cover.

CHAPTER XII

A UNIQUE ENTERTAINMENT

A Serving of Verse

In an interview on December 17, 1978, Walt Witcover described the birth of a unique entertainment first presented in April 1973.

Masterworks Laboratory Theatre was doing unusual work--however, our shows were not really bringing in an income and our audiences were limited to a special following that was not large. Practically speaking, I wanted to put together a show that had no set, a few props and was not a heavy unwieldy show like the others--a mini-production that could tour. Artistically speaking I wanted to work with the particular nucleus group that I did the production with. I had always toyed with the idea of constructing a theatre piece out of narrative poetry and music. I don't feel this production ever fully succeeded--what we needed was a dramatic writer-editor to put it together. It started without any real shape. We sat around in my apartment for weeks reading poetry and prose together--like Alice in Wonderland and Mark Twain. We wanted to find material that was like old friends--to create a chamber production that didn't make tremendous intellectual demands on the audience--not high drama or anything like that--just a fun, entertaining evening.

The four central performers (Leyna Gabriele and Peter Schlosser only sang) formed a kind of non-singing quartet--psychologically and vocally they were contrasting types that fit together. We selected material that was suited to the personalities of the performers--yet the actors submitted themselves to the material and in this way it evolved. The characters developed out of this process.

In Part I we wanted to make the poetry spontaneous--as if it was part of the action. Although the audience recognized the material we tried to create the illusion that it was coming out of the real needs and desires of these people on stage. A whole story was created about four actors preparing an entertainment and a crisis developed because Joe became upset about a friend who died in Viet Nam. At the end of Part I the audience does not really know whether the show will go on or not. In Part I there is a fourth wall; the actors do not relate to the audience. At the end of Part I, I (Witcover) arrive as the director and with poetry make them go on. The second and third parts break the fourth wall. The audience becomes a part of the happening. We added lots of color and properties. In the end we defeated the purpose. It became very expensive to do. When we brought it into the Silvermans' house for a private party, Actors Equity considered it a Backer's Audition. We had to pay the cost of \$40.00 apiece for the actors. With properties, etc. and the libation, the show cost \$1,000.00 to do. We did it again to raise funds for Israel at the Emelin Theatre in Mamaroneck. There we played to an audience of several hundred--and we had to have other actors serve the refreshments in the balcony. It became a complicated show to do.¹

A Serving of Verse is an example of an entertainment that originated and was completed during the work process. Witcover and the troupe did not begin with any specific text. The program emerged as a result of the permutations and combinations of the content. At the point of departure the only givens were the performers; actors and singers that Witcover wanted to work with. Using the actors' personal qualities as a source of inspiration and dramatic energy, a dramatic happening, tailor-made to the performers was created. However, with

1. From an interview with Walt Witcover on December 17, 1978.

hindsight, Witcover recognizes how this kind of production has its own limitations.

The seeds of destruction are built into custom-made theatre designed for a specific space or specific actors. Should one of the elements change, you don't have the same show. That happens in a play to some extent, but basically you have the same text. A Streetcar Named Desire with Jessica Tandy and Marlon Brando was not quite the same as with Uta Hagen and Anthony Quinn but the play was there. However with A Serving of Verse the performers were so much more a part of the event that when we tried to revive the show the next year without Cindy Holtz, the ingenue, who was in California, the show just never worked the same way at all. It was a totally different event.²

Witcover looked at the performers like a string quartet and selected them because their personal qualities or essences supplied the required instruments and not because of their individual vocal qualities. The singing which complemented the program was performed by Leyna Gabriele alternating with Lisa Mayo and Peter Schlosser. The quartet of actors was comprised of the violin, Cindy Holtz, an ingenue and soprano presence; the viola, Marjorie Lerstrom, a leading lady or alto-mezzo presence; the cello, Joseph Waddington, a juvenile or tenor presence; and the character actor, Stanley Brechner or bass/baritone presence. The director saw in Holtz innocence and purity, in Lerstrom strength and a wry sense of humor, in Waddington a romantic and at times self-pitying neurosis, and in Brechner a common sense, no-nonsense

2. From an interview with Walt Witcover on April 8, 1981.

attitude. It was these qualities alone that served as a beginning for the production. For five months the group met three evenings a week and read poetry and other material to each other, to select a score for their instruments; textual material--the written word rather than musical notes. However, Witcover hoped the overall effect would have the formal structure and impact of chamber music. He served, to some extent, as a dramaturge or literary editor but generally the participants selected the material that suited their personalities. Holtz discovered poems of Emily Dickinson and A.A. Milne; Lerstrom, works of Sarah Teasdale and Mark Twain; Waddington, material of A. E. Housman; and Brechner, maxims written by Benjamin Franklin. As the reading sessions progressed, the four found material from a much wider range of sources, and as they became more aware of their own individual persona, and more immersed in them, relationships among the four began to develop and take shape. Bit by bit, a scenario emerged in which the textual material they were uncovering served as a means of communication, almost a dialogue, among them. Out of the growing dramatic exchange Witcover began to mold a format which he hoped would lead to a suitable theatrical event. The company was careful to deal with the material in a simple and serious manner because some of it, especially that of the nineteenth century, can seem quite

clicked to a contemporary audience unless it is presented in an honest and unpatronizing way.

The scenario for A Serving of Verse developed into two sections. The first part concerned four actors who were preparing an entertainment for some guests. This involved gathering together properties and costumes and decorating the space; they also prepared refreshments for their friends (the audience). The prior lives of the four, their internal and external conflicts and desires were gradually revealed. Joe Waddington had just received word that his best friend had been killed in Viet Nam. Through the poetry or dialogue the other three helped him to go on. The second part of the evening was the actual "serving" of words and the third part involved serving refreshments. This brought the audience into the happening. While in the first half of the show there was a fourth wall, the second half included the audience. It was as if a party with a variety of parlor games were taking place. One sequence of this part included reading letters in which the actors were asked to identify the authors. In this way, the works of Benjamin Franklin, Mark Twain, Gertrude Stein, and others were presented. Music and song were introduced as part of the scenario. The singers Leyna Gabriele and Peter Schlosser arrived late in Part I. They appeared to be tipsy and explained that they were late because they had gone for a ride on

the Staten Island Ferry, at which point they sang "Recuerdo," a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay to music by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco. This work details a trip on the Staten Island Ferry. The singers also took part in the party preparations.³

In his final staging, Witcover did not want to present the material as a traditional staged reading. He wanted to create a physical life that would complement the spoken word rather than illustrate it. The framework of the scenario that had been created, that of a troupe of players preparing an entertainment and party for a small group of friends served his purpose. At one point, Cindy Holtz was on a stool decorating the stage, as Joe Waddington was scrubbing the floor, as part of the plot of A Serving of Verse, when they began a rendition of "The Highwayman." This set the stage for the physical action of the maiden letting down her long hair, which the highwayman caresses. The event with its inspiration in the poem was nonetheless also a part of the forward flow of the whole production.

As the program took shape, Witcover tightly choreographed the physical activity. The final result appeared to be spontaneous, but in actuality every movement down to the slightest lift of a finger was set. The rhythms

3. From a joint interview with Leyna Gabriele and Peter Schlosser on December 12, 1978.

of the poetry and songs served as a structure for the activity on the stage. Patrizia Von Brandenstein designed and selected the costumes, properties, and set pieces. She participated in most of the rehearsals and the choreography of the action was a result of the collaborative effort of Witcover, Von Brandenstein, and the troupe.⁴

Witcover also described how the rehearsal process was a learning experience for him as a director. Stanley Brechner had the habit of coming late to rehearsals without making either apologies or excuses. At one rehearsal this all came to a head. Lerstrom, who was always on time and very professional, exploded in a rage. Witcover's first impulse was to sit the players down and have them talk it over. Instead, instinct told him to have the actors play theatre games. These games involved open hostility as well as touching and holding. The actors were not allowed to speak, discuss, nor intellectualize what was happening. It worked. Lerstrom and the company made peace with Brechner who was later able to apologize. He was also prompt after that. There were no more communication problems among the actors and they

4. Patrizia Von Brandenstein has worked with Masterworks Laboratory Theatre since the La Traviata production. Recently, she was art director on the films, Breaking Away and Ragtime.

respected and cooperated with each other more fully during the rehearsals and the presentation of the program. They had become a true ensemble.

A Serving of Verse was the result of many months of trial and error. What ultimately took shape was a three-act presentation composed mostly of poetry, some prose, and folk songs from England and the United States, ranging from John Donne to Gertrude Stein. This collage was a happening much in the vein of court performances during the Renaissance in Europe in the way it involved the audience. It was an intimate show built on the personal qualities of the participants. It evolved, as did some of the productions of the Living Theatre and the Open Theatre. Witcover, however, did not use the actors as objects nor create stage effects with them as the Becks or Joe Chaikin might have done.

A Serving of Verse was presented first in February 1973 at the Spencer Memorial Church for eight performances only, and it was repeated at the church in November 1973. It was also performed once in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Alvin S. Silverman and at the Emelin Theatre, Mamaroneck, N.Y. Masterworks Laboratory Theatre used funds supplied by the Peg Santwood Foundation and the New York State Council on the Arts. The February 1973 production took place in the intimate coffee house of the Spencer Memorial Church, while the November

production was performed in the larger main room.

The following excerpts from a review by Norman Rosten will help describe the evening.

. . . It is not a poetry reading, but a theatrical event, wherein poems (voices) are revealed in a counterpoint of speech or song. The poems are also points of view; humorous, romantic, tragic. What Mr. Witcover has given us is a kind of anthology of emotion. It adds up to a delightful evening.

The framework is festive. The participants are involved in setting the stage for a party, preparing drinks and hors-d'oeuvres for themselves and the audience--a mood of relaxation and anticipation for what's to come. What develops--haltingly at first but with increased confidence and style--is a "dialogue" between the actors that seems casual but is in fact linked by the material, which is composed of poems, letters and songs skillfully selected and woven [together] by the guiding hand of Walt Witcover.⁵

5. Norman Rosten, "A Rosten Review: A Serving of Verse," The Brooklyn Heights Press, November 8, 1973, p. 13.

CHAPTER XIII
THE HAZARDS OF THE "PROCESS"

Mozart and Molière

In May 1977, Masterworks Laboratory Theatre presented its last production at Spencer Memorial Church. The program, Mozart and Molière: Two Adventures in Love, was made up of Mozart's Bastien and Bastienne and Molière's The Forced Marriage.

Bastien and Bastienne is a naive and charming pastoral operetta that was composed by Mozart in 1768 when he was twelve years old. Dr. Anton Mesmer, the discoverer of "animal magnetism," had asked the young Mozart to create a short operetta for his unique Viennese garden theatre. The original idea may have been inspired by Rousseau's Le Devin du Village. The operetta had been performed professionally in New York at the New Garrick Theatre in 1916. At the onset of the work, we find Bastienne, a shepherdess, weeping because Bastien, her betrothed, has gone to the city for a taste of the world before settling down to marriage. She has been told that he has met another love in the big city, so she

consults Colas who is worldly-wise and a would-be magician. Colas, who is attracted to Bastienne, promises that Bastien will return and advises her to play "hard to get." When Bastien returns, he consults Colas. He wishes to win back Bastienne. He admits to the magician that he met a baroness in the city, but she is just like an older sister to him. Colas offers to aid Bastien if the young man will introduce him to the baroness. Bastien agrees. Colas advises him to ply Bastienne with all the sophisticated phrases he has learned in the city. Of course the young lovers follow the necromancer's advice when they meet, which leads to a squabble. But eventually, after much song and hocus-pocus, they are reunited and all ends well.

The Forced Marriage (translated by Albert Bermel) is one of Molière's most popular one-act plays. The last professional performance of the play in New York was in the original French by the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde of Montreal in 1955. The play with music composed by Lully, ballet interludes in which Louis XIV, the Duc d'Enghien, the Marquis de Villeroy, and other noblemen took part, was first and foremost a court entertainment.

Sganarelle, a wealthy, miserly, and cautious man in his fifties, contemplates marriage to Dorimène who is much younger. As the play opens, he discusses the idea

with his friend Geronimo. We see that Sganarelle wants to get married for pleasure and companionship, but is afraid that he will be made a cuckold. Dorimene entertains the marriage proposal to get away from her father, the overbearing Alcantor. Sganarelle consults the philosopher Pancrace, the doctor Marphurius, another philosopher, and two gypsies who predict that Sganarelle will indeed become a cuckold. The hero has second thoughts but is forced into the marriage by Alcidas, the brother of Dorimene, who is also a swordsman. The plot is rounded off logically at the end and laughter prefigures misery. We know what the future holds for the hero.

The production made up of an operatic work directed by Leyna Gabriele and a classic play directed by Walt Witcover was presented to the audience as a finished work. It is dealt with separately in this dissertation because it involves the two major thrusts of the work of the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre and clearly reveals some of the hazards of the "process" evolved by Witcover and his followers. Although generally well received by audiences and critics, Walt Witcover, Leyna Gabriele, and Mark Spergel who served as stage manager for the Mozart piece, have discussed the problems of the production with me. Spergel, at present a doctoral student in theatre at the City University of

of New York, has directed operas and intends to direct more in the future. The lessons learned in Mozart and Molière have helped all three move forward in their work. As a result of the production, Masterworks Laboratory Theatre set up an opera workshop in 1978 under the direction of Gabriele and Peter Schlosser who is also doing graduate work at the City University of New York. The workshop is devoted to training singers in the "process" and experiments with operatic material.¹

The pairing of the two works was interesting in that it was an attempt to prove that the work of a mature genius, Molière, and a young genius, Mozart, could best be served with realistic productions. Putting the works together also served to demonstrate clearly the overall philosophy of the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre. Both Gabriele and Witcover feel they were stimulated by the productions they had seen directed by Roger Planchon. They wanted to approach Mozart and Molière with the same logic and truth and yet explore how far they could go in creating the extraordinary and extravagant playing on the stage that the Mozart opera and Molière play called for. They rejected any conventional notions of style as an

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1. In the opinion of the writer of this dissertation, Leyna Gabriele directed a very charming and effective production of The Goose From Cairo, a children's opera by Mozart, with members of the workshop in 1980.

admission of defeat but they were both aware of the demands of the material. Gabriele would have to lead her actors-singers into stage behavior that would follow from the given situation, be amusing, and never melodramatic, at the same time being suitable to the fairy-tale quality of the text. Witcover would have to find a way of leading his actors into a frenzy of farcical behavior bordering on the grotesque while remaining believable to an audience. The two directors faced the task, mostly out of a desire to prove the soundness of their theatrical philosophies and technical approaches.

Bastien and Bastienne

The challenges proved to be many for Leyna Gabriele but she feels she learned a great deal from them. Although she has studied and worked with Witcover over the years, she was a novice director and had difficulties implementing the ideas and principles she believed in during the rehearsals.²

The first problem that she encountered was one of pre-conception. Having directed Bastien and Bastienne a year earlier with students in a workshop group at Princeton University, she tended to lead her new cast along the paths she had discovered before. With hind-

2. From an interview with Leyna Gabriele on February 9, 1979.

sight Gabriele feels it would have been more exciting to have allowed her performers more freedom. This also served to alienate the cast, for as they went through the motions of experimentation and improvisation, the director, nonetheless, imposed on them staging she had used earlier.

Mark Spergel, who helped organize the auditions found them quite revealing.

Singers came in. Some had very little acting experience and were very rigid. Leyna freed some of them by giving them simple tasks and improvisations. We discovered some talent but basically Leyna cast MLT people and the auditions really served no purpose.³

Gabriele admits she selected three actors-singers who had worked with the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre before because they spoke her "theatrical language" and she was afraid to attempt to teach new ways to performers during the rehearsal period. While justified, Gabriele may have passed over some fresh talent because she did not trust her ability to bring them to performance level in the prescribed time.

The first few rehearsals were basically discussions. The cast was asked to research peasant life of the period and explore the economic and social situation of these people. Six weeks of improvisation

3. From an interview with Mark Spergel on May 20, 1981.

followed. Gabriele said:

The script merely indicates entrances and exits. We had to constantly ask questions about the relationships of these people to each other. Where they lived--what the "flow of the day" in their lives was like, etc.⁴

However, the rehearsals seemed to get stalled in this process. Too much time and energy went into exploring the psychological motivations of the characters. Mark Spergel felt the search for this psychological motivation became an end in itself and ultimately did not aid the production. The piece itself is light and care-free, and without very deep personal conflicts.

During the early staging rehearsals for the production, the actors-singers worked without the music which they were learning at separate rehearsals. Once they were able to play the operetta without music, and Gabriele felt they were secure in their acting choices, she introduced the music into the general rehearsals. By working this way, she hoped the actors-singers would concentrate on the dramatic reality of the text rather than falling back on the conventional ways of playing operetta which tend to retard the forward flow of action. Her goal was to make the music seem to be a spontaneous result of the dramatic situation, but the music was

4. Leyna Gabriele, Interview.

introduced into the rehearsals too late, resulting in tension. In a panic, the director was obliged to impose staging on the performers. When the moment came to choreograph the actions to the words and music, the step Witcover feels is so important in this process, Gabriele and the company faced opening night. There was little time left to refine the staging and as a result the production was overladen with physical activities, much of which seemed contrived.

Spergel cites one example of the stage action that seemed gratuitous.

Towards the end of the piece, Vilma (Bastienne) had to perform a trill. It was decided that John (Bastien) would tug at her glove. It was not really motivated and carried the organic approach too far. It was funny for the wrong reasons . . . a lot of music is truly sub-textual and it becomes redundant or inappropriate to look for an external action for the music. There does not have to be a one-to-one correspondence between all the musical phrases and all the actions. I believe that one should take cues from the music but not so literally. While I'm in favor of the MLT approach to opera--because most other opera is made up of traditional, arbitrary garbage, you can go too far. Too much action and activity can distract the audience.⁵

Too much activity on stage led the audience to concentrate on the spectacle rather than listening to the music. Looking back, Gabriele, Witcover, and Spergel see the problem as one of scheduling in that not enough

5. Mark Spergel, interview.

time was left in the rehearsal period to extract and edit, so that the music, words, and actions came together in a tight, cohesive whole.

Another difficulty was the use of the space and stage set. Gabriele allowed the performers to create their houses (the shepherd's house and the magician's house) with boxes and furniture during the improvisational period of the rehearsals. Gabriele wanted her performers to develop their own set as she had seen in so many of Witcover's productions. What she failed to understand was that Witcover had developed a technique in collaboration with his set designers which gave his performers the illusion that they were creating their own playing environment while in reality he was subtly influencing their choices. Gabriele was unclear about how she wanted the stage to look and her set designer had never worked in this collaborative way before. Confusion ensued. At the last minute, the set design was hurriedly and arbitrarily created.

The final production had charm, but it was too literal; too "daily life." The set was overladen with objects and the production was too busy. Gabriele and her stage manager, Mark Spergel, now recognize this. The two Brooklyn reviewers, however, were not unkind. Norman Rosten wrote:

. . . I don't know offhand whether the young composer

wrote the libretto, but it's the music that counts, and it proves to be what we'd expect of a budding genius: witty, tuneful and completely self-contained. No earth shaking work, but a delight to hear. The three singers who play the Shepherdess, her rustic lover, and a philosopher-magician, are respectively Vilma Vaccaro, Jon Tanner, and David Barron. They sing better than they act, but no matter. You'll love every minute. It is directed with humor and intelligence by Leyna Gabriele.⁶

And Babette McKee wrote in the Phoenix:

. . . It is a charming, naive adventure in pastoral love, replete with a shepherdess and rustic lover and spiced with a touch of benign lechery in the form of a philosopher and would-be magician. The voices of the trio, Vilma Vaccaro, Jon Tanner, and David Barron as the necromancer, are clear and true. Some hocus-pocus special effects connected with the magician are fun and the sweet young things are winsome and tender-- a Spring's delight . . .!⁷

The Forced Marriage

Witcover asserts that he did The Forced Marriage because he liked the translation and found the play tightly contrived. Wanting to bring what he terms the "realistic" approach of Roger Planchon to the production, he now recognizes that he made some mistakes. Not being able to find an actor to play Sganarelle he played it himself. Of this he said:

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6. Norman Rosten, "Musical Theatre: Mozart and Molière... and Witcover," The Brooklyn Heights Press, May 12, 1977, p. 8.
 7. Babette McKee, "Lechery and Laughter in Master-Works' Mozart and Molière," The Phoenix, May 12, 1977, p. 17.

When you do both you short-change yourself-- as an actor you undercut your directing and as a director, you undercut your acting. With my director's mind working, I never let myself go as an actor. Finally, I had to have Patricial Lawlor, one of my directing students, come in and help out.⁸

Lawlor did, indeed, serve as an objective eye for Witcover but his troubles began with casting. He chose a young man to play Lycaste who looked right and gave a good reading at the auditions but never grew into the part, rather than a student who wasn't exactly right but might have brought more imagination to the role. He also selected a young actress for the role of Dori-mène because she looked like a "young peach."⁹ Witcover no longer casts because of looks.

Witcover used music in the production. His rationale for this is revealing.

One of the flaws I have as a director is that I never get to the final rhythm and timing of a piece; that is, a written text. Music does that for me; I can use music to give rhythm and timing to a play.¹⁰

Looking back on the Molière production, Witcover feels he did not leave enough time for the refining process because he concentrated on his role as an actor.

8. From interviews with Walt Witcover on February 4, 1979 and May 13, 1981.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

He now realizes that much of the physical action on the stage was not supported by an inner organic life and that the result was a busy production, top-heavy with properties and objects. The Molière piece would have fared better with less activity on the stage. Witcover admits that he often does not get to the final stage, editing the work; he hopes in the future to allow himself the luxury of previews. He quipped, "Stanislavski said, 'twenty-one performances before you go'."¹¹

Witcover's disparagement of his work notwithstanding, the reviewers looked upon it more favorably. From Rosten's review:

. . . Now for Molière and Witcover. They deserve one another; they were made for one another. Mr. Witcover is a great comic performer who can do astonishing things with a turn of his head or pitch of his voice. He is funny in his walk, his meditations (you can see him thinking), his silences; in short, he is the total actor. . . . He has directed The Forced Marriage in a fine translation by Albert Bermel which captures all of Molière's comedic-satiric spirit. . . . He has assembled a good company for these capers. I especially enjoyed--if we put rascally Witcover out of the way--the two philosophers played by Dimo Condos and William McEnaney. Richard Hill's duel scene was quite funny.¹²

And from Ms. McKee:

The Forced Marriage by Molière, directed by Walt Witcover, is a gem. Witcover plays the part of Sganarelle, the role developed by Molière himself. A gentle romp with the old

11. Ibid.

12. Norman Rosten, The Brooklyn Heights Press.

rascal shows Molière's acute observations of character and manners. Molière could not resist toying with the nonthings (sic) of the vacant-headed philosophers and their convoluted logic. The Forced Marriage, while a comedy, has a sad resonance. . .

Each member of the cast deserves honorable mention for a fine performance; Walt Witcover, Dimo Condos, a philosopher; Richard Hill, the bride's brother; the list goes on. The three gypsies, Alice Rosengard, Ilene Levitz and Diane Landis, are particularly fine. Dale Johnson, Mitchell Moses and Gregg Smith provide the musical accompaniment for both the production and the audience's enjoyment during intermission . . .13

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13. Babette McKee, The Phoenix.

PART VI

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE GROUP AND ITS FUTURE

CHAPTER XIV

SELF-ASSESSMENT BY MEMBERS OF THE GROUP

Masterworks Laboratory Theatre has not achieved the wide-spread recognition nor had the impact on the American theatre that other groups like the Open Theatre have had, yet it has had an influence on many people who work today and will continue to work in the American theatre in the future. The majority of actors, singers, directors, and others who have worked with the group are still functioning in the American theatre and cinema and will at least in subtle ways prompt others to approach the drama using the Stanislavski "method." Some are now in the process of teaching actors and singers to work in this way. As many actors schooled in the "method" taught by Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Uta Hagen, and others have achieved fame and fortune in the American theatre and cinema, there is little resistance on the part of many to following this path. In the world of opera, there are still many who hesitate to adopt this approach, but the work habits and philosophies of those who have worked with Masterworks Laboratory Theatre have touched and will continue to touch others in opera. As with many

theatrical groups in the past, the impact on the mainstream of the theatre can be measured only years later. Should only one director influenced by Masterworks Laboratory Theatre achieve recognition, which thereby enables him to launch a great many productions adhering to the Masterworks aesthetic, the world of theatrical scholars will suddenly want to know more about the group. My personal bias is obvious. The group is not just an isolated case, but has influenced many practitioners of American theatre.

The reviews of the work speak for themselves. They are scarce because only a few critics attended the productions of the group, and some of these critics, like Norman Rosten, were self-confessed friends of the group.

What do the participants themselves see as the shortcomings of the group, and what have they learned from their experiences with it? Fortunately, all the members of the group interviewed, including Walt Witcover and Leyna Gabriele, were not reticent in their self-criticism. In our discussions, many questions were unanswered, or had several answers because of the predictions of the individuals interviewed.

To judge the work of the group, one must first define it. Its very name implies two different directions: Masterworks Laboratory Theatre. The word Masterworks

obviously refers to the group's desire to work on non-contemporary plays and operas but the words Laboratory and Theatre are almost contradictory in their connotations. The word Laboratory suggests a place where research and experimentation transpire; where very few outsiders enter, while the word Theatre suggests a place where people assemble to witness an event. The production of a dramatic happening is implicit in the word Theatre. Throughout the history of the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre this idea has been a source of conflict both philosophically and practically. Recognizing this, Witcover and Gabriele are seeking ways to solve the dilemma in the future. A Laboratory is also a place where experiments fail but research continues, while a Theatre is a place where the results are judged and the very survival of the group often depends on these judgments. Funds are hard to acquire for experimental theatre that doesn't produce results which are acceptable to either the general public or a potential backer.

To better understand the group, it will be helpful to look again at their original stated purpose. Page one of the Certificate of Incorporation of Masterworks Theatre Inc. (April 5, 1968) says:

To cultivate, promote, foster, sponsor and develop among its members the appreciation, understanding, taste, and love of the Dramatic and Musical arts;

to create a theatrical centre and a repertory company for the advancement of such purposes; to secure the interest of patrons for these arts; to foster the development in the community of an appreciation of the Dramatic and Musical arts by promoting, producing and staging theatrical and musical productions and entertainments; to do any and all lawful things necessary, suitable and proper for the accomplishment of these purposes, all of which purposes shall be for no pecuniary gain.¹

The organization was set up as a theatrical laboratory by and for professional artists and technicians to explore and develop fresh approaches to the staging of classic plays and operas and to reach new audiences for these works. The philosophy at the base of the approach was the Stanislavski "method" both in the rehearsal of these works and in the training of young actors and singers. It was hoped that this organic approach, as further developed by contemporary American teachers, would help directors and performers explore fresh and vivid procedures and stage forms, thereby releasing new vitality in the production of classic dramatic and musical works in order to make these works more exciting and accessible to modern audiences. The Masterworks Laboratory Theatre was to be a home for these professionals as well as a laboratory and school; a place for artists of the theatre, no matter how professional,

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1. Certificate of Incorporation of Masterworks Theatre Inc., April 5, 1968, p. 1, on file at the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre, 40 West 22nd Street, N.Y.

to continue their training in an atmosphere conducive to exploration and growth without the pressures inherent in the commercial theatre.

Initially the goals were: a) to complete work on the La Traviata project; b) to train singers in acting; c) to develop new audiences for opera; d) to explore a classic play.

We can see that the group realized its goals in some areas and did not in others. Among those that have worked with the group, an appreciation, understanding, taste, and love of the dramatic and musical arts has been nurtured. However, no real repertory company for the advancement of such purposes has emerged. While Masterworks Laboratory Theatre has secured the interest of some patrons to support these pursuits, it has not done so on any grand scale and its impact on the community has been limited.

The group has shown that it could produce non-contemporary dramatic and musical works and make them more exciting and accessible to modern audiences. It has also at times provided a setting for artists who came to this theatre with varying degrees of skill that was conducive to exploration and growth without any of the pressures these artists found in the commercial theatre. Masterworks Laboratory Theatre did complete work on the La Traviata project and has future plans for it. Leyna

Gabriele and Peter Schlosser are still in the process of training actors-singers, although the number of students who participate in the opera workshop is limited to twelve.

Certain issues have been examined by those participants who have been interviewed. Their responses are varied. They are: 1) Does all non-contemporary material lend itself to a "method" approach? 2) Do physical activities really enhance a play or musical piece? 3) How does the "method" approach tend to affect the pacing of a non-contemporary dramatic piece? 4) How is a group that does not concern itself with money affected by lack of it? 5) How important is administration and planning in this kind of group? 6) What is the nature of casting in a group that wishes to offer possibilities to actors that are not found in the commercial theatre? In many cases, the questions overlap. On the first question of whether or not non-contemporary material lends itself to a "method" approach, we have a difference of opinion. Walt Witcover and Leyna Gabriele insist that all classic material can be approached in this way with very positive results. Others, however, disagree.

Stanley Brechner, discussing the question in relation to his work on Man of Destiny by George Bernard Shaw (one of the productions of the group not dealt with in this dissertation), stated:

Man of Destiny is a very rhetorical play. I saw the major problem or challenge to create a physical life which would sustain the rhetoric. My philosophy as an actor and director then had really come from working with Walt. I thought actors should develop an inner life that led them into action whether or not it was faithful to the circumstances of the play . . . In fact, the farther away they went from the circumstances, the more possibilities they created. I no longer feel this way . . . As an actor playing in Man of Destiny, I sensed the production did not work. At times, the physical life we created added to Shaw's text, but most often we could not create a physical life for all of the verbiage of the play. Generally, the audience responded best to the parts of the play where we had not added any physical life. I think we took too many liberties with Shaw; his words are really the most important element. I really feel now that not all material can be done with our approach--and one of the great dangers is that our approach can be too imaginative; it can be a self-aggrandizing trip for a director. He may be creative, but the play can be lost.²

In his review of La Traviata, Albert Bermel defines the problem. Bermel is the only critic cited in this chapter because he supplied the translations and adaptations for the group, and as such, he can be considered a participant.

. . . Realistic directing helps realistic plays, but doesn't do much for poetic or elusive drama except reduce it.³

This, however, is not really an indictment of the

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2. From an interview with Stanley Brechner, January 22, 1979.
 3. Albert Bermel, "On Stage: Verdi as Dramatist," The New Leader, June 28, 1968, pp. 33-34.

"method" but rather a recognition of the confusion that has its source in the belief that modern realistic acting is a common result of the "method" approach. The Stanislavski "method" does not have to lead to a contemporary realistic acting style, as his experiments amply prove. If it is not axiomatic that a "method" approach leads to a contemporary style of playing, it does seem to be a pitfall, nonetheless.

Eric Bentley is a member of the Advisory Board, and has allowed his translations and adaptations to be performed by the group. Of the 1971 production of Gogol's The Marriage, he wrote:

. . . Let me add that if the actors must occasionally improve a phrase, they must take care not to do so in a language that is not in the style and period of the dialogue generally. I was upset on Saturday when someone said, "For crying out loud," and so on . . .
 . . . Actually, it is dangerous to improvise in a masterpiece, since improvised dialogue is loose in rhythm, while the dialogue of Gogol's play is disciplined, stylized, tight. The style was spoiled whenever an actor broke up a sentence, repeated part of it and the like.⁴

The point is that the approach led to some lack of style or a kind of behavior on stage which did not represent that of the Russians at the time the play is set. However, the text as presented by Bentley is only

4. Eric Bentley in a letter to Walt Witcover dated February 20, 1972, on file at the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre, 40 West 22nd Street, New York.

his version and it can be argued that the improvised dialogue of the actors was just as accurate as the words of Bentley.

Now, let us examine the second question: Do physical activities really enhance a play or a musical piece? Again, from Albert Bermel's review of La Traviata:

. . . But acting tasks have a way of turning into fussy activity. Witcover occasionally gives his singers more busy work than they need . . .⁵

Nancy Ponder also recognizes the tendency:

It is easy for a director to get lost in this process. It is extremely important to have a clear vision of a play before starting rehearsals. Once you pick a play, it seems to me you make a commitment to the playwright. What we have to work with are the words; we must play the play that the words have created. While it is true that Stanislavski taught us the importance of a sub-text, it is the actual written text that holds the key to what the play is about. When you perform worthy writers like Chekhov and Shakespeare, you must trust the material; that the text will hold its own. If the director is not clear about what he wants, there is a tendency to experiment too much--often creating physical activities on the stage that are gratuitous. A director must be able to choose the physical activities that will finally appear in a play on a stage as carefully as a worthy writer has chosen his words. This was not always the case with Walt. Because he was often unclear about what he wanted from a play, and did not truly trust the actors, much of the physical activity became inappropriate, often there was too much of it on the stage.

There is a time to peel onions and a time to put the knife down. But often, Walt did not put the knife down because he did not trust his actors. He imposed physical activity on them.

5. Albert Bermel, The New Leader.

Often he asked actors to create business for a specific moment in the play. This, in a way, contradicts one of the principles of the "method" which Walt believes he practices. If you ask an actor to concentrate on creating a bit of business, the choice tends to be an intellectual one simply because a human being cannot do two things at once. It is not possible to be totally immersed in a role in an organic way; to be experiencing the moment as a "method" actor, and to be intellectualizing at the same time. Theoretically, with our approach, stage business or activities should stem from the instincts, or that part of the brain which will function when we are truly experiencing the moment. These are very subtle and nebulous ideas but a different part of an actor functions when a discovery is made organically than when it is intellectually planned or figured out. Because we never had deadlines and, therefore, had too much time, Walt tended to fill up the time allotted with new improvisations that were non-productive. It seems to be a principle that work increases to fill up the time allotted for it. Often we were just futzing around. This is an argument for setting deadlines. While I see that three weeks is not enough rehearsal time, often we worked on something too long. We never really had a schedule and never came to a time where we edited and threw useless material away. We often over-rehearsed. There is an old saying: "It takes two artists to paint a picture. One to paint it and the other to tell him when to stop."⁶

Often in some other productions which were really demonstrations of the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre "process" there was no attempt at all to try to present finished work. It may be because this was Witcover's philosophy, or a question of not really dealing with the last-minute refining of a production.

6. From an interview with Nancy Ponder on July 23, 1981.

Gabriele defended the process when discussing the 1974 production of Lovelives in which she sang The Four Last Songs (Vier Letzte Lieder) of Richard Strauss:

. . . I want to stress that this was an experiment--an exercise in a method of work, in a way of preparing material. It should be seen as a work process . . . In March 1979, I will be doing these songs in concert. Of course, I will not do any of these physical activities. However, my reality will be grounded in this process. I will rehearse my songs going through these activities. Thus, when I perform, the emotional life will be there.⁷

In speaking about the same production, Lovelives, and the Allen Hughes review which appears earlier in this dissertation, Terry Walker, who served as Associate Director of the project, argues both sides of the issue:

I don't think he (Hughes) understood the thrust of our work--that it was an exposition of the kind of developmental work singers can do when working on a musical piece. The problem is that the actor-singers created their own stories or plots and the playwriting in this kind of work is weak. It's like putting on a performance built around improvisations coming out of acting class. . . . Walt Witcover tried to tie these pieces together under the title Lovelives but there was no true unifying "spine" for the whole production--there was no overall vision to it. . . . Hughes criticizes the scenario built around the Gershwin, Kern, Porter songs which tells of a cabaret singer falling into prostitution. I tend to agree. I've seen Kitty Muldoon sing those songs just standing next to a piano--doing nothing--and they are just as effective as when she created a whole story.⁸

7. From an interview with Leyna Gabriele on February 2, 1979.

8. From an interview with Terry Walker on January 10, 1979.

The issue is best summed up with the following statement by Gayle Swymer while discussing her work on the Tango Ballade from The Threepenny Opera (Brecht-Weill) in the group's presentation entitled Lyric Theatre in 1972.

Good vocal sound is often sacrificed to the drama of the situation as in Gondoliers in 1975 . . . As an experiment this sort of thing is useful. While not necessarily faithful to the play in general, it creates avenues of exploration. In this way we sometimes can find new ways to present material and bring new life to musical theatre. Of course, in a full production, one must only select those ideas which serve the total text.

. . . You must be trained in acting as well as singing for this kind of experimentation.⁹

Swymer who is active in the world of musical theatre today as a teacher and director and performer feels this experience has taught her a great deal, and she still values and uses the "method" process in her work.

Our third question is: How does the "method" tend to affect the pacing of a non-contemporary dramatic piece? It is important to remember that we mean the "method" as practiced by Witcover. Stanley Brechner phrased it succinctly:

. . . One of the great dangers is that our approach can be too imaginative, it can be a self-aggrandizing trip for a director. He can be creative, but the play can be lost.¹⁰

9. From an interview with Gayle Swymer on December 10, 1978.

10. Stanley Brechner, interview.

To Eric Bentley this was a problem in Walt Witcover's production of The Marriage:

. . . The other thing is purely a matter of rhythm and timing. I think the action of the show is unduly slowed down at times by the musical and mime additions. It is as if there would be a musical interlude in the midst of a Chaplin comedy--while the camera stops . . .¹¹

June Storey, speaking of the production of Miss Julie in 1971, in which she played the title role, recognizes the interruptions in the drama that stage business can lead to.

After a few rehearsals we reached the point of diminishing returns. There was too much confusion and too many activities on the stage. At the last minute we had to cut pages out of the script to shorten it. Our version ran over two hours in rehearsal.

. . . Sara Edlin as Kristin prepared a complete meal on stage which was interesting as an activity but totally consumed her attention and slowed down the pace of the play.¹²

Storey now feels that the activities that the actors and directors developed during the rehearsal period often became ends in themselves and retarded the forward flow of the action of the play. She mentioned her first entrance in the play in which she appears with garlands of flowers and proceeds to decorate the stage. This activity became too important and destroyed the focus of the play as well as its flow. With hindsight,

11. Eric Bentley, letter.

12. From an interview with June Storey on November 25, 1978.

Storey intends to avoid this kind of embellishment in the future. She also no longer believes that a great deal of improvisation on a script really helps actors. While it may help them to create the prior life of the characters they are playing, she realizes that it can be dangerous, if it causes them to stray from the circumstances of the play. She sees no reason to improvise on actual lines in a well-written play like Miss Julie where Strindberg has provided the actor with all the material needed to show an audience the inner thoughts and life of the characters. Storey does not really fault the "method" approach to this production, as much as the lack of experience of its director, John Kwitkor. With more experience she feels he could have succeeded with Miss Julie.

Terry Walker is a teacher, performer, and director who frankly acknowledges his own shortcomings. Of his production of Danton's Death and its pacing, he spoke candidly, opening up another question, the old one of Laboratory versus Theatre:

. . . The way we worked filling up each moment tended to expand the material. We were a laboratory, an experimental group and I wanted to do the play in this way--to give every moment all the value I could. The problem with Masterworks was that we didn't stick to our philosophy. I don't think it should have been cut. It wasn't being done as a commercial and slick production.¹³

13. From an interview with Terry Walker on December 21, 1978.

Danton's Death had to be cut by about one-third just before opening because it ran too long. Walt Witcover supervised the cutting.

Walker also had second thoughts about a later production, Bravo, Bureaucracy, staged in 1974. He directed Badin the Bold and Peace at Home. Of these he said:

I miscast, the playing was heavy-handed and there was too much business. Courteline read better than we were able to play it. The whole evening never really worked except for The Commissioner where Stanley Brechner, the director, was able to create a life for the play, although not necessarily in a French style, that worked.¹⁴

Not only can the pacing be affected by this approach, often even the ease of the actors on the stage is compromised. Roy Barnitt described the physical production of Walt Witcover's The Boor from The World of Young Chekhov in 1971. He stated that there were properties everywhere, namely thirty lighted votive candles on stage. The actors had to avoid setting their costumes on fire.¹⁵

Masterworks Laboratory Theatre was not set up for pecuniary gain. This is stated in its Certificate of Incorporation. Money, or the lack of it, obviously affected the group in many ways. It is fine, in theory, for artists to want to concern themselves with art only,

14. Ibid.

15. From an interview with Roy Barnitt on November 21, 1978.

but just how practical is this philosophy? This leads us to the fourth question we wish to consider: How is a group that does not concern itself with money affected by the lack of it?

Speaking in general about the years 1975-1976, at the Spencer Memorial Church in Brooklyn, Witcover revealed some of the difficulties that only money could allay:

. . . It became too costly to operate at the Spencer Memorial Church in the winter and unpractical in the summer; heating costs were rising and in the summer both actors and spectators fled the heat of New York.
 . . . Then it was hard for any one of us to commit ourselves to directing a whole project for which we were not being paid.
 . . . It became more and more difficult to hold onto actors, too--the good ones left to get paying jobs.¹⁶

The lack of money also prevented some productions from being fully realized, or continuing, as in the case of A Serving of Verse. In an interview on December 17, 1978, Witcover said:

Practically speaking, I wanted to put together a show that had no set, a few props, and was not a heavy unwieldy show like the others--a mini-production that could tour.
 . . . To create a chamber production that didn't make tremendous intellectual demands on the audience--not high drama or anything like that--just a fun, entertaining evening.
 . . . We added lots of color and properties. In the end we defeated the purpose. It became very expensive to do. When we brought it into the Silvermans' house for a private party, Actors Equity considered it a Backer's Audition. We

16. From an interview with Walt Witcover on February 4, 1979.

had to pay the cost of \$40.00 a piece (for the actors). With properties, etc. and the libation, the show cost \$1,000.00 to do . . . It became a complicated show . . .¹⁷

As an illustration of how the lack of money can undercut a production, we have the following statement by Jane Alexander who appeared in Salon-Comédie in 1974.

It is difficult, too, to do "showcase productions"--not because of the space, time, or status (or lack of it) involved but because eventually there is not enough \$ to do it RIGHT. Of course, all the money in the world will not assure that a piece will be done "right"--but an early 19th century play which so concerns itself with manners and mores, should have the support of seeming elegant even if it is illusion. This was a problem I felt our particular production faced . . .¹⁸

Walt Witcover, Leyna Gabriele, and producer Richard Hughes were painfully aware of the lack of money. Their future plans which will be discussed in the next chapter, take this shortage into account.

Many of the handicaps of the group seem to stem from slack planning and administration, especially in confronting deadlines or production dates. Obviously, fixing a date for a production puts pressure on a director and changes the atmosphere in which the actors and directors work. But working without deadlines can be perilous, too. Fixing them is part of the next question we explore: How

17. From an interview with Walt Witcover on December 17, 1978.

18. Jane Alexander in a letter to the writer of this dissertation, dated April 2, 1979. On file at the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre, 40 W. 22nd St., N.Y.

important is administration and planning in this kind of group?

Witcover was constantly torn between his "Laboratory" and his "Theatre." Not wanting to deal with the constraints of commercial theatre, he tended to finesse some of the practical considerations of managing a non-commercial enterprise. For even in non-commercial theatre, money, an audience, and results are important. Witcover often repeats his dream:

I want to create an environment where we can experiment; where there are no commercial pressures; where there is plenty of time.¹⁹

Be that as it may, Witcover made decisions that were self-defeating. As Ponder stated:

Moving out of Manhattan to Brooklyn was a mistake. You could hardly find the theatre in Brooklyn. We never advertised. It seemed as if Walt really didn't want an audience. Perhaps it's because he has been hurt too much in theatre. Walt's work was brilliant and it should have been seen. He is an artist--more interested in solving the problems posed by a play than seducing an audience. But why does one want to solve a play's problems? To achieve the playwright's desire to move other human beings and to communicate. But it doesn't matter how good the vision and theories are, ultimately you must reach the people. And therein lies the rub. We really did not alter audiences nor did we alter the theatre, and yet our method of work does offer the possibility of true life on the stage rather than a stage life. We can take the past and create life on the stage. We can reach back a century or more to touch life, the passions, joys, and sorrows of people of another time to know that we as humans have always been

19. From an interview with Walt Witcover on May 20, 1981.

the same, made of flesh and blood. That kind of theatre could really be commercial, audiences would respond, but we never went after them. We seemed to get lost in the process.²⁰

Often we have seen that Masterworks Laboratory Theatre hastily put on a production because nothing else had been planned at the time. Terry Walker pointed this out in discussing Bravo, Bureaucracy in 1974.

[The plays] were done simply to use the space at the church that spring because nothing else was planned--although Walt Witcover selected three directors this time as a safety measure should one bow out.²¹

Often, of course, the abandonment of a production was unavoidable, due to the loss of an actor. Early in 1970, Barbara Barrie had to leave the rehearsals of A Doll's House and the production was halted. Late in 1970, Jerry Stiller had to go to Hollywood to work, and the Courteline project was postponed. As a result, The World of Young Chekhov was written, rehearsed, and presented in a very short time. The results, however, were positive. Fortunately, The Boor was in rehearsal at the time, and Richard Moss was able to adapt quickly some short stories of Chekhov to complete the evening. All in all, luck was with the group; Gabriele, Moss, and Witcover readily admit that the entire production was hastily conceived

20. Nancy Ponder, interview.

21. Terry Walker, interview.

with no prior thought nor planning.

At other times, productions were launched just to spend the public monies the group received. This was the case with Lessons in Love in 1976. In an interview on February 4, 1979, Witcover discussed all the practical problems the group was having in 1976, that discouraged production. He admitted:

. . . However, as we were receiving public grants, it really behooved us to put on a show and thus continue our exploratory work.²²

The lack of planning was evident early in the group's history. Richard Moss admitted that he went into rehearsal with Antigone without a full cast and found that the six-week rehearsal period scheduled was not adequate for him to help the actors deal with the material in an exploratory manner. It must be remembered that in show-case productions, actors who are not being paid often have other jobs, and can rehearse only in their free time: evenings and weekends. It is easy to see that six weeks is not sufficient to explore a play like Jean Anouilh's Antigone under these conditions. The director's lack of experience was also a factor. Of this experience, Roy Barnitt said:

A few days before opening, Mr. Moss had not yet decided what to do with the last scene. In the

22. From an interview with Walt Witcover on February 4, 1979.

fourth week of rehearsals, Moss replaced the actor doing the chorus.²³

Yet, while Moss complained of not having enough time, Terry Walker felt that he had too much time and no deadline, especially in his production of Danton's Death.

I did not know how to use the time. There were many people in the show. Having a lot of time is a great luxury but it is also a trap--you forget to plan and budget your time.²⁴

Actors and directors who worked with Masterworks Laboratory Theatre like Roy Barnitt, Stanley Brechner, Nyla Lyon, Nancy Ponder, and June Storey, all agree. They love the luxury of open-ended rehearsals but also recognize the traps. They also point out how difficult it is for artists who are not being paid to commit themselves to ventures that have no specific production dates. Walt Witcover also hopes he can create a viable way of working on projects in the future that will conform to a timetable and still allow adequate time for exploration.

Finally we come to the casting; that is, the philosophy of casting as it existed in Masterworks Laboratory Theatre. The group wished to offer actors an opportunity to play parts that they would not capture in the commercial theatre. In theory, this also included well-

23. Roy Barnitt, interview.

24. Terry Walker, interview.

known performers. But in practice actors were usually type-cast, as in the commercial theatre. However, as the group presented classic material, which is rare on Broadway, it did offer a few name actors the unusual chance in New York City.

Generally, those actors interviewed were positive about the opportunities that Masterworks Laboratory Theatre offered them. Apropos of Miss Julie, June Storey said:

Masterworks is valuable as an organization because as an actor you can experiment and play roles you would not normally play in the commercial theatre. Both Roy and I were too old for the parts we played and we would never be cast in them in other circumstances.
 . . . It's very different when I work in the commercial theatre.²⁵

Salome Jens, a member of the Advisory Board of the group, who had worked with Shirley Knight in Witcover's production of The Rivals at the Actors Studio (although Lee Strasberg felt she and Knight were too old for their roles), put it this way:

It's really wonderful and unexpected to . . . find well-known performers like David Brooks working--doing parts he would not normally be cast in and doing them new ways. The pressures of Broadway don't exist.²⁶

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25. June Storey, interview.
26. Salome Jens. From an interview with Salome Jens, Leyna Gabriele and Walt Witcover by Casper Citron. "From the Algonquin," WQXR, New York, March 16, 1971. Ms. Jens is referring to David Brooks in The Boor from The World of Young Chekhov, 1971.

Jens expressed the brighter side of using well-known actors in these productions, but we have seen how, at times, the fact that these actors were under no contractual obligation to the group caused delays, and the abandonment of productions.

But most often, the group cast to type. On two occasions, this backfired, for while the actors were like the characters they played in real life, they lacked the skill with which to portray these qualities in a meaningful way on the stage that was faithful to the intent of the text.

Of Ann Sandersen's playing Antigone, Richard Moss said:

Ann Sandersen who was really a "flower child" in life, could not seem to play that on stage. I guess that's an example of a person who is the character in reality, but who loses that quality on the stage.²⁷

Moss learned his lesson. Witcover has sometimes cast in the same way, as Nancy Ponder reveals when she describes the production of Salon-Comédie:

. . . Another problem was the casting of the talented Timothy Noble because he was absent-minded like the Marquis de Valberg which he played. However, Timothy was not trained in the way we were working and we spent too much rehearsal time obliging him to work our way and use the same theatrical language that we employed.²⁸

27. From an interview with Richard Moss on November 12, 1978.

28. From an interview with Nancy Ponder, January 4, 1979.

Ponder believes that Witcover has not always followed his theories. Witcover himself has admitted this in the case of The Marriage and The Forced Marriage. It is not lack of integrity that has led to this, but rather insecurity. With hindsight, Witcover now believes he would cast less to type and more to talent, if the talent shows up for auditions. Often experienced and talented actors avoid showcase work, either because they are busy earning a living in the theatre, or they have had negative experiences in the past doing this kind of non-paying theatre.

However, the group was experimental and perhaps Witcover had a larger goal in view; that of teaching Timothy Noble the "method." He patiently did the same with others such as Ed Herlihy and made them disciples of Stanislavski and himself. For as Ted Forlow who also appeared in Salon-Comédie said:

Sure we had problems with Timothy, but it really opened up his eyes. Because of his association with Masterworks Laboratory Theatre, he has studied acting and has grown as an artist enormously. In this sense, the experience was a truly positive and learning experience.²⁹

In this sense, all who have worked with Masterworks Laboratory Theatre have grown. They have a richer appreciation of the classics and opera, and are more open to exploration and the Stanislavski "method." While some

29. From an interview with Ted Forlow on January 16, 1979.

have faulted the group for work which was self-indulgent and even self-serving, and others have decried the lack of organization, not one person interviewed thought his or her time spent with Masterworks Laboratory Theatre was wasted. Indeed, all felt they had grown a great deal as a result of the experience and almost all have come to share the aesthetic of the group. Masterworks Laboratory Theatre has not achieved all its goals as stated in its Certificate of Incorporation, but it has cultivated, promoted, fostered, sponsored, and developed among its members the appreciation, understanding, taste, and love of the dramatic and musical arts--and the majority of those people so affected are still active participants in the American theatre in 1980.

CHAPTER XV
THE FUTURE OF MASTERWORKS LABORATORY THEATRE

Since February 1979, Masterworks Laboratory Theatre has been housed in a loft at 40 West 22nd Street in New York City.

Witcover and Gabriele both feel that they do not want to present finished productions at this time. The idea of a theatre laboratory is primary to their thinking. They have chosen to create an environment where the kind of work they respect can flourish; to provide conditions in which actors and singers can practice their crafts without the added pressures of the commercial theatre. They both have had exposure to the world of academic (college and university) theatre and feel that there is little room for their forms of experiment in this area. As neither the commercial theatre nor the academic theatre offers them the environment they want, they feel obliged to continue to build a desirable setting for themselves.

Both stress that the "process," rather than the finished product, is important to them. This "process" is described as a "method" approach to the classics and opera which, for the most part, is virgin territory in

the theatre in this country. In order for this "process" to occur, a congenial atmosphere with no commercial pressures is necessary. They still believe that the projects should be initiated without preconceived ideas on the part of the performers, producers, and directors. This in itself may seem like a contradiction, because most directors have an idea for a play or opera before producing it. Indeed, it is usually that idea that is the stimulus for undertaking the work. However, Witcover and Gabriele believe that works can be rehearsed so as to allow freedom for mutual exploration. Whether this is practical, or even possible, remains to be seen. Witcover recognizes that this approach or theory of theatre is basically a reflection of his talents, energies, desires, and possibly his insecurities.

Masterworks Laboratory Theatre shares with other theatre groups the task of finding support. When no specific production is planned, monies do not come readily from public funding institutions, private foundations, producers, nor even friends. Even with the support of the New York State Council on the Arts, other funding organizations, and their friends, Masterworks Laboratory Theatre was an expensive endeavor. It cost Witcover and Hughes and Gabriele a considerable portion of their own incomes for over ten years. In fact,

Witcover has had to withdraw the application for grants from the New York State Council on the Arts for the past two years because Masterworks Laboratory Theatre could not commit itself to scheduled productions. In the future, he will not even consider producing plays and operas for the public.

Both he and Gabriele felt they had accomplished what they set out to do; that is mount a given classic in a fresh style that turns up unusual and unpredictable results. Witcover recognizes his own bias which is to use the "method" to approach these classic works for today's (and perhaps tomorrow's) audiences. Witcover also points out that, with his "process," he produced finished productions of the classics more often than did the Actors Studio. Lee Strasberg has encouraged Witcover in this pursuit from the early days of La Traviata at the Actors Studio.

Perhaps the kind of theatre Witcover and Gabriele envision is impossible in this country. It is more than fifty years after Stanislavski's theatrical productions and experiments in opera, and as yet, no theatre exists in the United States that evokes the atmosphere and environment that Strasberg, Witcover, and others desire. Even the Group Theatre was primarily set up to work on contemporary American material.

In discussing the Group Theatre, Witcover pointed

out that it was successful in part because of its organization; that the functions of running a theatrical group were divided among Cheryl Crawford (businesswoman), Harold Clurman (dramaturge and director), Lee Strasberg (teacher), and others. Masterworks Laboratory Theatre never really had that kind of organization. Witcover believes that he never found a dynamic business person with whom he could work, nor a producer who saw the commercial possibilities of the group and could lead it to financial success. Richard Hughes, who took over the duties of producer for the group when Richard Moss left, did so out of friendship for Witcover. As Hughes was actively pursuing a career in the commercial theatre, he was not able to focus all of his energies on the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre. Gabriele, Hughes, and Witcover have devised a new formula. Not wishing to repeat themselves (especially their mistakes), Masterworks Laboratory Theatre will, in the future, be only a laboratory. However, this does not mean that they do not expect their works to reach completion. Instead, they will concentrate on experiments, demonstrations, and sections of the classics and operas that can be presented to backers and producers. In effect, they will be a source of ideas that others may pick up. They hope that producers with a sense of adventure and dramatic foresight will like what they see and then put the work into production.

This formula would allow an outsider to produce a show and bring some recognition and money to Masterworks Laboratory Theatre.

With this in mind, a prompt script of the La Traviata production is being prepared for producers, opera companies, and television companies, in the hope that this will lead to a production of a modern, up-to-date La Traviata. Work has been done on a new musical version of Alice in Wonderland. Scenes from the work, shown to potential backers, have been supported by funds supplied by Witcover and Gabriele. Since February 1979, Leyna Gabriele and Peter Schlosser have conducted an opera workshop in the loft. This is really a more structured out-growth of work that they had started earlier when the group was still housed in Brooklyn. At first, they conducted two classes for actors-singers. They have developed a series of exercises to develop the acting and vocal skills of their students so these actors-singers will be able to meet the demands of an organic "method" approach to lyric opera.

Schlosser and Gabriele started work on a production of The Goose From Cairo in October 1979. Presented in the summer of 1980, the work, written by Mozart in his mature period is, in reality, an opera for children. The libretto is bizarre and delightful. It was cast with

students of the opera workshop, or performers who have worked with Masterworks Laboratory Theatre before. All the participants spoke the same theatrical language and understood the "process" of the group. The production was performed in an English version by Sheldon Harnick. The group supported the production at showcase level. At the start of rehearsals, the opera workshop had about \$800.00 for the production. It just about paid for a pianist, the electricity, and other expenses incurred during rehearsals.

Gabriele directed the play and described the process as slow. During the first five or six weeks of rehearsal before the Christmas Holidays of 1979, the group had explored only the background of the piece. Improvisation was extensive in order that the performers could create a logical life for the characters they were portraying and to support the melodramatic and extraordinary events of the libretto. Gabriele felt that the performers learned a lot; she specifically mentioned the improvement of the young woman playing Calidora, the ingenue lead. Slowly but surely the actress found resources in her own behavior to build the character she finally successfully portrayed.

If The Goose From Cairo is produced by an outsider after the showcase production, Gabriele wishes to follow

it up with a package of operas for children designed for television. She has observed children at theatrical productions for years and finds that they are often restless when there is dialogue on the stage, but attentive when there is music or singing, even if they don't understand the words being sung. Her package is comprised of short chamber operas which, for the most part, take place in one act and run anywhere from forty minutes to one hour.

Should a television project reach fruition, she wants many of these operas filmed on location, in pastoral settings outdoors. All in all, the project could be valuable in helping to introduce children to opera, a practice almost unheard of in the United States, but less uncommon in Germany and Italy.

Witcover hopes the Mozart opera gets beyond the showcase level; that it attracts a producer. For that would serve as a stimulus for others to use the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre in the same way. He is willing to offer anyone who shares the aesthetic of the group the space to work in, as well as a limited sum of money to work with. Masterworks Laboratory Theatre could thus supply new ideas and productions to the American theatre. Witcover can also introduce directors to potential backers and producers. He, of course, expects to participate, if and when any productions are realized.

For the immediate future, Witcover and Gabriele intend to support these activities with their own funds and some help from their friends. Witcover says he supports his "habit" by teaching acting. They do not want to produce as such--simply develop ideas and material and let others do the producing. They want to avoid, among other things, hassles with theatrical unions. As they will not embark on production schedules, they cannot expect funding from governmental organizations or private foundations. Finally, they wish to separate the idea of a "theatre" which implies production from the idea of a "laboratory" which implies experimentation. They want to reach the public eventually, but they realize from past experience that it is impossible for them to marry the two ideas. They have, therefore, opted for the "laboratory" setting in which the "process" rather than the production for the marketplace, is primary.

APPENDIX
WALT WITCOVER

If, as it is said, an institution is the extended shadow of one man, it should be obvious that the Masterworks Laboratory Theatre was and is the shadow of Walt Witcover. His work is interesting only to the extent to which he, as an individual, may influence the course of an art form. In the contemporary world, the individual has gradually come to count for less and less; in the world of theatre this is all too apparent. Great television networks, film companies, and production outfits dominate the world of theatre and cinema, where the criteria of success have become, not artistic merit, but the amassing of wealth and fame. Centuries of inherited prejudice have led to a commercial theatre where a man is only as good as his recent box office receipts. Even good critical notices mean little if the work doesn't make money for the backers. Witcover, for his own reasons, retreated from the establishment, the commercial theatre. He was rescued to some extent by the devotion

of a small band of friends and disciples who recognized his genius and put themselves at his service. In the act of doing so, they learned a great deal about the art of theatre. Many of these same people continue to work in cinema, television, and theatre, and still attempt to practice, whenever possible, what Witcover teaches.

Witcover does have his shortcomings, however. As we examine his work, one recurring theme becomes evident--an obsessive quest for perfection grounded in a fear of failure. This has often prevented him from finishing projects as he went from a good scheme in the rehearsal process to one he believed would be even better. Frequently when nothing is completed, the act of always seeking perfection leads to a kind of inertia as life passes.

Witcover's father died when he was six years old; his father had been a sculptor and musician and his mother lectured on plays and current books. At the age of seven, he asked his mother for piano lessons. She agreed. As his stepfather was a doctor and often occupied in the evenings, Witcover's mother started taking the young Walt to the theatre to keep her company. He especially loved to go to concerts; music fascinated him. His parents were never rich, but Witcover was denied no essentials. Even as a young college student, he had the support of his parents. While he finished college and

attended the American Theatre Wing under the G.I. Bill, he was never under pressure to earn a living. In fact, he was encouraged to become an artist--an artist in an uncompromising way; one who followed his own aesthetic beliefs without feeling the need to become a money-making star. In a strange way, this formed a pattern which still exists in his life. He has never known great prosperity, success, or fame, nor has he known great adversity, failure, or total obscurity. Indeed, he has avoided many opportunities that offered the alternative of great success or great failure. It would be untrue to say his life was easy or uneventful. As a young man of twenty-three, he began psychotherapy. During that period from 1950-1965, he admits to a series of emotional disturbances. They seemed to be seasonal, allowing him to function very well in the warm spring and summer, and forcing him to hibernate during the cold months. Witcover claims that when it was spring he had surplus, even demonic energy which led to restless and unremitting activity, while in the winter he was immobilized.

During this period, two men played an important part in his life. Herbert Berghof, his teacher, and Lee Strasberg, his mentor, both unaware of his "seasonality," so stimulated his imagination that he devoutly attended their classes. In those days, it was not so easy to admit to terror or emotional difficulties, so he offered

no explanation to Herbert Berghof when he turned down the role of Lucky in Waiting for Godot. Alvin Epstein, who played the role, went on to a very substantial theatrical career. Later, Witcover also retreated from directorial opportunities.

At the age of forty-one, he began to function whole-heartedly. While the previous fifteen years had interfered with his growth in a commercial sense, he had continued his artistic growth under the tutelage of Strasberg. Finally, after years of psychotherapy and maturing, Witcover knew what he could deal with and what he could not. He chose to create his own theatrical environment, which was not an easy undertaking. Unlike his two brothers, one a successful lawyer, the other a successful doctor, Witcover is not comfortable with business people. He admits that he cannot "sell himself" and has no exploitative skills. He now has regrets when he looks back on his career. After La Traviata was presented at the Actors Studio, he had offers of backing for a Broadway production, but he chose to form a laboratory theatre instead. In many ways he did not, and still does not, offer himself to the world as a candidate for the public favor (or public scorn).

Witcover has cultivated a personality that never affronts conventional standards and opinions. He is apolitical, neither to the right nor to the left, as is

reflected in his choice of theatrical material and his middle-of-the-road approach. He calls himself a humanist and has no personal interest in the new theatrical movements. He is concerned only with the rejuvenation of an existing theatre and theatrical style. At times it seems as if he is unable to understand and deal with ideas with which he is out of sympathy. Yet Witcover's mental precocity has not diminished with age. He is devoted to literature, enjoys the formal aspects of music as well as its emotional content, and loves classic beauty in all the arts. At times, he seems to possess the insatiable curiosity of a child, and he has a habit of questioning everything endlessly. Possibly, he has developed his analytical powers to an extreme degree, almost as a defense against the disturbing challenge of his emotional needs. As a result, he is only now beginning to accept the unpleasant fact of mediocrity in the world. For in his own self-contained theatre, he will present nothing until it is ready, and he is assured that the results are good, by his unfailingly high standards. He has dismissed any past failures as productions that were not ready.

Witcover now believes he is ready to direct plays for money. That is, plays he already knows how to direct--plays he has come to understand through his application to them. But for his own sense of adventure,

he approaches material that he doesn't know how to direct. His discovery of the way to present the material is also part of his "process." He presents these notions to the world with an attitude of innocence and unworldliness which masks his seriousness. While he prefers to be a Socrates dissatisfied, rather than a fool satisfied, he is, nonetheless, learning to compromise and to admit the shortcomings and problems inherent in his "process."

But Witcover is artistically alive, and excited by material, talent, and space. He now admits that he never walked into a first rehearsal without preconceptions of the final production of a work, but always tried to hide it from the performers because he honestly believes it is destructive to the rehearsal process. Talented actors always excite him and he is learning to examine more closely the real qualities of a performer. In many ways, he was too intuitive and quick in his assessment of talent in the past, leading him toward unexamined assumptions and violent prejudices. Perhaps that is all behind him now, and he will cast more carefully in the future. When he comes upon a new space, a room, a building, an outdoor area, he still wants to fill it with theatre.

Witcover is incredibly candid and honest. He

realizes that working in a vacuum will not correct what he believes to be abuses in the theatre. Having crossed enough rivers, he intends never to move into Brooklyn, or into exile again. He is also beginning to trust audiences more, although he still tends to seek out an audience that is on his own level of understanding and knowledge. His years of profound self-absorption are over, but he still occasionally neglects the individuality of others unless they are performers or personal friends. He is deeply devoted to both groups. Kind and nurturing though he is to friends and students, at times he enjoys disturbing actors, either in class or in rehearsal. Witcover no longer expects perfection, but he still pursues excellence, and as all performers tend to repeat what is comfortable, he disturbs them to drive them to greater achievement, as a coach drives an athlete.

Perhaps because he is an artist, he is a curious mingling in one person of the gravity of age and the playfulness of youth. The man, like his work, inspires vehement criticism or devotion.

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