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**Poets and painters in the theatre: A critical study of the New
York Artists Theatre**

Gross, Brenda Suzanne, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1989

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POETS AND PAINTERS IN THE THEATRE:
A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE NEW YORK ARTISTS THEATRE

by

BRENDA S. GROSS

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.

1989

1989

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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 philosophy.

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The Artists' Theatre, an Off-Broadway producing company, was founded in 1953 by John Bernard Myers, an art dealer. Its primary purpose was to stimulate theatrical collaboration among avant-garde poets, visual artists and composers. Although the Artists Theatre never became successful enough to find a permanent "home," it had an impressive list of playwrights and set designers which today reads like a Who's Who in American poetry and American art, respectively. Its playwrights included the poets John Ashbery, James Merrill, James Schuyler, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch and V.R. Lang. Larry Rivers, Grace Hartigan, Alfred Leslie, Jane Freilicher, and Elaine de Kooning were among the noted painters who designed for the theatre. Myers also recruited Billy Strayhorn, John Gruen and Paul Bowles to compose music for the theatre.

John Myers began the Artists Theatre for a number of reasons, not the least of which was recognition. He was interested in drawing attention to his fledgling art gallery and to the artists whom he showcased. Although still a novice in the competitive New York art world, Myers had become known for his willingness to take a chance on new talent. For example, Larry Rivers, Robert Goodnough and Helen Frankenthaler all had their first major shows in his gallery. Nevertheless, recognition and financial success

did not come quickly or easily. In 1953, his group of new, unknown artists was still selling slowly, and painter Hans Hofmann cautioned him that it would take at least seven years for his gallery to catch on.

"One had to cut a figure or be ignored in New York City or anywhere else," Myers recalls in his memoir, Tracking the Marvelous: A Life in the New York Art World.¹ Producing theatre that utilized the talents of the newest, most experimental painters, poets and composers could evoke recognition for himself and for the gallery. "More interaction within all of the arts might speed us on our way. Collaboration was the key to open doors."² The Artists Theatre would also give Myers an opportunity to promote and stimulate the dramatic work of young poets, such as Frank O'Hara. These poets excited him, and he had already begun to publish their work in small pamphlets under the auspices of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery.

Lionel Abel, one of the playwrights whom he produced, saw Myers's move into theatre as a logical progression. In The Intellectual Follies, he recalls:

After the new developments in painting in 1950, there was a new development in theatre, the beginnings of what was called "off-Broadway," and it seems appropriate, when one looks back, that John Meyers [sic], who was an editor on View during the War, and was managing editor of Instead when Matta and I got it out,

and after that directed the Tibor de Nagy Gallery (which showed some of our best and most advanced painters) should have played a leading role in organizing play productions in the Village, . . .

Myers had had a certain amount of personal experience in theatre, having begun his career as a puppeteer. He entrusted the directing, however, to an intimate friend, Herbert Machiz. According to Myers, it was Machiz who helped him to recognize the potential and importance of collaboration between the visual, literary and musical arts. Following a brief directing career in the Army Air Corps, Machiz had gone to Europe on the first Fulbright Fellowship for theatre. He stayed on to stage-manage for such notables as Orson Welles, Louis Jouvet and Jean Cocteau, and had operated his own theatre-in-the-round, the American Theatre in Paris. After returning to the States, Machiz was never quite satisfied with American theatre. He had found French drama to be visually impressive and admired French efforts at artistic collaboration. In Paris, he discovered "a surprising number of experimental productions in which young poets, painters, directors and actors pool their talents to express something new."⁴

Myers, who greatly admired Machiz, was inspired by his experience. "I listened spellbound to Herbert's descriptions of the performances he had attended that had décors by great artists, splendid music, plays by

poets."⁵ The theatre that Machiz described provided a model for Myers, who wished to showcase as many of his artistic and literary friends as possible.

The Artists Theatre would nurture Myers's image of himself as an arts impresario. As Lionel Abel put it, Myers imagined himself "a kind of Diaghilev."⁶ Myers had already confirmed Abel's suspicion in his autobiography. He recalls the delusions of grandeur that he suffered in the early 1950's:

I had now begun to develop rather conceited notions about myself as a latter-day Ambroise Vollard or Diaghilev. It is a weakness of many dealers who conceive of themselves as impresarios without whom artists would be helpless, lost, uninspired. It took several years before I shook off this illusion.

James Schuyler, a poet produced and published by Myers, takes a dimmer view of the art dealer's aspirations and of the Artists Theatre. According to Schuyler, Myers had a skewed view of how "great art" happens. "John wasn't a creative person himself and he had this feeling," recalls Schuyler. "He imagined that if he brought different sorts of creative people together like writers and painters and so on, 'something' was going to happen."⁸

In any case, Myers did become an impresario. The Artists Theatre produced the early dramas of a number of young playwrights who would go on to become some of the most

celebrated poets in the United States and drew some of the country's most renowned, experimental visual artists into the theatre.

It also produced avant-garde dramas that would not normally have reached the stage. Verse dramas influenced by surrealism and dada. Political dramas set in ancient or fantastical settings. Anti-naturalistic plays focussing on mythic figures and biblical dilemmas. Dramas that were unconventional in length, content and style. In Herbert Machiz's words, "new plays which had been written with no eye on the box office and no desire to flatter a vast public."⁹

Myers used the theatre to help satisfy what Kenneth Koch has described as his "lifelong love affair with the avant-garde."¹⁰ It was a place for him to incorporate the efforts of his favorite poets, painters and composers. According to Herbert Machiz, it "represented one of those few and far between enterprises aimed at a merger of writers, painters, and composers whose work had already received, or was just beginning to receive, respectful attention from those interested in what still must be called, however hackneyed the terms, 'highbrow' or 'avant garde.'"¹¹

The Artists Theatre's first program which opened on February 25, 1953 included four one-act plays: Tennessee Williams's Auto-Da-Fé, Try! Try! by Frank O'Hara, Presenting Jane by James Schuyler, and Little Red Riding Hood by Kenneth Koch. Robert Soule, Larry Rivers, Elaine de Kooning and Grace Hartigan, respectively, designed sets for the first four plays. A less ambitious second program, consisting only of Parker Tyler's The Screen, designed by Alfred Leslie, opened on April 29, 1953 at the Finch College Theatre on East 78th Street.

The Comedy Club, a tiny theatre in Sniffin Court off Lexington Avenue, served as the site of the third program. On May 18, 1953, three plays opened: The Heroes by John Ashbery, with set design by Nell Blaine; The Lady's Choice by Barbara Guest, with set design by Jane Freilicher; and The Bait by James Merrill, with set design by Albert Kresch.¹²

The second season opened at the Amato Opera Theatre in November of 1953. Lionel Abel's The Death of Odysseus shared the bill with Lorca's The Love of Don Perlimplin and Belisa in the Garden. Both productions were designed by Alfred Leslie and the latter had an original score by jazz composer Billy Strayhorn.

The following years saw productions of more original scripts. Myers produced Fire Exit by V.R. Lang, The Immortal Husband by James Merrill, The Ticklish Acrobat by Robert Hivnor, another full-length play, Absalom by Lionel Abel, as well as some revivals of critically esteemed plays, namely Ibsen's Little Eyolf; Cocteau's Knights of the Round Table, translated by W.H. Auden; The Waltz Invention by Vladimir Nabokov; Victor by the surrealist poet Roger Vitrac; and In the Summer House by Jane Bowles. Other artists involved in set design included Alex Katz, Kendall Shaw, Kyle Morris, Robert Kato and Julian Beck.¹³

The Artists Theatre did plays by the avant-garde for the avant-garde. It performed to a subscription or membership audience ("in imitation of the London theatre clubs," according to Myers) composed largely of fellow poets, painters and musicians who made for a supportive environment but, along with the extremely short runs of the plays, diminished the theatre's chances for critical recognition.¹⁴ According to John Myers, those reviewers who did come found the Artists Theatre to be "poetic," "hermetic" or "diarrhetic."¹⁵

The theatre's Off-Broadway status also proved to be a stumbling block to recognition, as this anecdote of Lionel Abel's illustrates:

When a play of mine, the Death of Odysseus was done in the Amato Theatre, on Bleecker Street, Harold Clurman, who went with me to the opening and was enthusiastic about the play, apologized to me for not reviewing it in The Nation. He said he was not allowed to review Off-Broadway plays there.¹⁶

Not all critics were prohibited from writing reviews, and a number went out of their way to praise the theatre both for its individual productions and for its overall effort to provide an alternative to mainstream Broadway and even Off-Broadway theatre. Following their eleventh production, Richard Hayes, critic for The Commonweal, observed, "In contrast to the majority of experimental groups which sprout each year outside the noisy Broadway arcade, their work has shown consistently an eclectic intelligence, enterprise, a positive program."¹⁷ That same year, Henry Hewes of The Saturday Review stated, "One of the few groups who have had the courage (or the nerve) to do somewhat experimental theatre in New York lately is the Artists Theatre."¹⁸

After seeing Robert Hivnor's The Ticklish Acrobat, Saul Bellow commented in The Partisan Review, "I do not know how to give Mr. Hivnor his due more than to say that he is the real thing, a writer."¹⁹ Lionel Abel's Absalom received the most formal recognition. The Village Voice awarded the first Obie to his play Absalom, and Show

Business named it the best Off-Broadway play of the year (1956).

In general, however, the Artists Theatre never enjoyed great critical success and has been largely ignored by historians, perhaps because of its short life (although it continued in name until 1969, its last vital year was 1956), its unusual aspirations and the uneven quality of its productions. Nevertheless, it is significant for a number of reasons. It introduced poets like James Merrill and Kenneth Koch to the theatre and helped to create an artistic community. In effect, it took literary and visual artists out of isolation and gave them a taste of collaboration, not always sweet but not unstimulating.

The Artists Theatre also produced a courageous collection of experimental dramas that would otherwise never have reached the stage and, ultimately, the page. (An anthology entitled Artists Theatre exists, and three of the plays were published in Playbook by Grove Press.) Finally, the theatre probably helped, in some small way, to further Myers's attempt to "create an ambience in New York for unconventional, or as we used to say, 'avant-garde' art. As far as I can see," observed Myers, "the poetry and plays helped to enhance the climate in which we could breathe."²⁰

As Myers notes in his autobiography, no one kept a record of the Artists Theatre. Neither he nor Machiz assembled an archive of materials prior to their deaths and few of the poets and painters have the original scripts, set designs, photographs or other memorabilia from their individual productions.²¹ As mentioned earlier, little has been written about the theatre, aside from an article by Herbert Machiz, a few reviews and a brief mention in Tracking the Marvelous. The reviews that do exist are very general (they do not go into detail about the productions) as is the Machiz article.²²

In order to learn more about the development and impact of the Artists Theatre, it was necessary to interview the painters and poets who had been associated with it. These interviews form the core of Chapters 1 and 2, which reconstruct the history of the theatre through the eyes of its participants. Since the theatre existed over thirty years ago, few poets or painters could clearly remember specific details about their productions. They did, however, eagerly discuss the theatre's impact upon their lives and work.

The last two chapters focus on six plays produced by the Artists Theatre, critiquing them for innovations in

style and content. Since so little objective material about the theatre exists, these chapters do not attempt to provide a production history. Rather, they are designed to give the reader a sampling of the innovative drama produced by the Artists Theatre. These six plays were chosen for their accessibility (they are among the few published in anthologies) and because they illustrate the diversity of the Artists Theatre's offerings.

As a whole, this study seeks to establish the Artists Theatre's significance within the context of the period, the avant-garde and the American theatre. It examines the idea of an "artists' theatre" and takes a second look at forgotten poetic dramas of the Fifties. By documenting the contributions of the theatre's writers and artists, it also highlights neglected segments in the careers of some of America's leading poets and painters.

Notes to Introduction

¹John Bernard Myers, Tracking the Marvelous: A Life in the New York Art World (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 166.

²Ibid.

³Lionel Abel, The Intellectual Follies: A Memoir of the Literary Venture in New York and Paris (New York: Norton, 1984), p. 217.

⁴Herbert Machiz, "The Challenge of A Poetic Theatre," Theatre Arts 40 (February 1956): 72-74.

⁵Myers, p. 164.

⁶Interview with Lionel Abel, New York City, 11 December 1987.

⁷Myers, p. 123.

⁸Interview with James Schuyler, The Chelsea Hotel, New York City, 22 December 1987.

⁹Herbert Machiz, ed., The Artists' Theatre: New York, (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960), p. 7.

¹⁰Interview with Kenneth Koch, Columbia University, New York City, 11 November 1987.

¹¹Machiz, Artists' Theatre, p. 7.

¹²Brochures and playbills of the Artists Theatre.

¹³Ibid., p. 167.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 166.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 167.

¹⁶Abel, The Intellectual Follies, p. 218.

¹⁷Richard Hayes, "The Stage," The Commonweal (23 April 1954): 69.

¹⁸Henry Hewes, "Broadway Postscript," The Saturday Review (13 February 1954): 28.

¹⁹Saul Bellow, "Theatre Chronicle: Pleasures and Pains of Playgoing," Partisan Review 21 (May/June, 1954): 312-317.

²⁰Myers, p. 167.

²¹James Schuyler's script for Presenting Jane was destroyed in a fire as were Alfred Leslie's set designs and photographs. In addition, a number of the artists, such as Grace Hartigan and Jane Freilicher, never created or kept preliminary designs. Also, because the Artists Theatre was such a low-budget operation, there was never much in the way of photographs or articles to save.

²²Nachiz, Herbert, "The Challenge of a Poetic Theatre," Theatre Arts 40 (February 1956): 72-74, 88-89.

The painters involved in the Artists Theatre during the years 1953-56 included Larry Rivers, Grace Hartigan, Jane Freilicher, Al Kresch, Nell Blaine, Alfred Leslie and Elaine de Kooning. Robert Fletcher, Richard Hare, Robert Soule and Julian Beck also designed sets for the theatre, but these four did not "cross over" to theatre from another medium. Fletcher, Hare and Soule had worked as theatre set designers, and Julian Beck was the organizer, with Judith Malina, of the Living Theatre.

For these seven painters, however, the Artists Theatre was definitely a "side trip" from their chosen careers. Although none (except, perhaps, Rivers) could be regarded as being at all well-known in 1953, they had all had exhibitions and were beginning to gain recognition in the New York art world. The seven are generally regarded as belonging to the "early wave of the second generation" of The New York School.¹ This "early wave" carried on the spirit, and to some degree, the aesthetic of the first generation. As Irving Sandler points out, the term "generation" is used to refer to "a group of artists close in age who live in the same neighborhood at the same time, and to a greater or lesser degree, know each other and partake of a similar sensibility, a shared outlook and aesthetic."²

The first generation of The New York School had included Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Philip Guston, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, Hans Hofmann and Willem de Kooning, among others. The breakthroughs and innovations of these artists during the late 1940's helped to shift the focus of national and international attention to the New York art world. These artists are often conveniently grouped as Abstract Expressionists, although Irving Sandler, author of The New York School, argues that the bonds between the artists were often more social than aesthetic. He asserts that "The New York School constituted a loose community which was primarily an open network based on personal friendships, more social than aesthetic in nature."³ The artists were drawn together by respect for each other's work and a desire for innovation, but their work often did not fit into the tidy category created for them by the critics, as Joseph Ferren points out:

The thing is conveniently labeled Abstract Expressionism by the critics. It isn't quite so simple. If Abstract Expressionism is the largest vortex, the antithesis, the rejections, the yet unmade developments are also there.⁴

In fact, two of the Abstract Expressionists who had the greatest impact on the second generation, Willem de Kooning and Hans Hofmann, both agreed that art need not be abstract in order to be modern. Hofmann, who

became known as America's greatest art teacher, had his students begin by painting live models or still life. Willem de Kooning, who established himself with his first one-man show in 1948 and went on to become one of the most influential artists of his generation, also resisted the limitations of the abstraction-versus-representation dichotomy. He painted the figurative Woman series and also spoke out against the pitfalls of divorcing subject matter from painting:

The question, ..., was not so much what you could paint but rather what you could not paint. You could not paint a house or a tree or a mountain. It was then that subject matter came into existence as something you ought not to have.

In de Kooning, the early wave found a dedicated risk-taker who constantly challenged himself and refused to conform; his painting had an honesty and aggressiveness that inspired them. Like many of the younger artists whom he was to influence, he explored the range of possibilities between abstraction and expressionism, testing the limits and exploring the pulls between the two polarities. It was this exploration that young artists admired and emulated. "The artists who worked within these broad limits all believed themselves to be in the vanguard, for the style was both open to original developments and

also the butt of considerable art-world and public hostility."⁶

The artists of the second generation, who came onto the scene around 1950, admired the audacity and independence of the first generation and shared its desire to be in the vanguard of American art, especially the seven painters who designed for the Artists Theatre. Although they were influenced by the earlier generation, these painters forged boldly ahead with their innovations. They carried forward the ideas of their mentors while attempting to define their own individual style and aesthetic. According to Irving Sandler, many of the early wave artists "turned toward 'realism' while painting in a gestural manner."⁷ Again it was a question of exploring the ground between two polarities, in this case near-literal representation and gestural near-abstraction.

Another related choice made by the second-generation artists was in emphasis, i.e. stressing either process or image. For the most part, the paintings of the Fifties artists are characterized by an "unfinished" or painterly look that draws our attention away from the subject and back to the artist and the artist's process. Even for those first and second generation artists that scrutinized their subjects, it was, as Art News editor Tom Hess put it, "the

how of it" that was exciting, the process of painting.⁸

Larry Rivers explains,

The roundness of a bright yellow grapefruit may make me happy for a few moments. Its juice may satisfy my thirst. I may find its genetic history engrossing but as an artist what has meaning for me is the color I'm going to choose and where I'm going to put it on the surface and the way I put it there. What to choose and where to put it and how.

As Sandler observes, the reputations of the second generation have suffered by comparison with the first generation (it is often considered the "tail end" of Abstract Expressionism or "derivative"). In addition, "the second generation was eclipsed by a third generation, the innovators of Pop, Op, Minimal, and Conceptual Art."¹⁰ Critics often ignore the innovations made by the Fifties painters that were significantly different from those of the first generation, as well as their often considerable influence on the artists of the sixties.

Of the seven artists who worked for the Artists Theatre, Larry Rivers gained the swiftest and, perhaps, the longest-lasting recognition. Born Larry Grossberg in the Bronx in 1923, he changed his name to Rivers during his early career as a jazz saxophonist. Through music, he met Nell Blaine and Jane Freilicher, both of whom were married to professional musicians. Both Rivers and Freilicher, who, at the time, was studying English at Brooklyn College,

became fascinated with painting. Both began studying with Blaine and later became students of Hans Hofmann. Rivers has acknowledged Blaine's influence on his career, saying, "Nell -- somehow everything is through Nell."¹¹

In 1949, Rivers had his first one-man show at the Jane Street Gallery. In 1950, Rivers was in the "New Talent" show at the Kootz gallery which gave a boost to his career as well as the careers of the other young artists selected, such as Grace Hartigan. And, in 1951, he had the first of eleven solo exhibitions at John Myers's Tibor de Nagy Gallery.

Rivers's work is generally considered to be more figurative than abstract, although he mixes both styles. Like de Kooning, he "adapts the freedom of the Abstract Expressionist technique towards figurative ends." He is more explicit than de Kooning however, in introducing subject matter into abstract paintings.¹² He is noted for using commercial, vernacular images such as cigarette packs and advertisements in his paintings and like Rauschenberg, is said to have anticipated and, in a sense, paved the way for Pop Art. He enjoys subverting clichés of all kinds.

One of his most famous paintings is a takeoff on a mythic historical moment entitled "George Washington

Crossing the Delaware" (which, in turn, inspired a Kenneth Koch play of the same name). "George Washington" is a good example of the rebellion against convention and struggle for independence characteristic of the artists of the second generation. Rivers did the painting in 1953, when he describes himself as having been "important, cocky and angry enough to want to do something no one in the New York art world could doubt was disgusting, dead, and absurd" He decided to do a painting "dedicated to a national cliché," an answer to the standard dignified portrait of the national leader. According to Rivers, the reaction to his painting was about the same "as when the Dadists introduced a toilet seat as a piece of sculpture in a Dada show in Zurich. Except the public wasn't upset -- the painters were."¹³

When asked by Frank O'Hara about the progression of the career, Rivers explains his willingness to take risks and his unwillingness to conform or to become too comfortable with one style in this way:

You don't 'use' a style and you don't 'abandon' anything, the way I see it. The history of art and the history of each artist's development are the response to the discomforts of boredom. I don't mean boredom in the negative sense. I mean it in the sense that it would be a bore to approach a fresh canvas, and once again paint in what had become personal clichés.¹⁴

Rivers wrote poetry during the fifties and has done further design work for the theatre. Today, however, he

prefers to stick with painting. "I seem to find the greatest place for my talent on a a piece of paper or canvas."¹⁵

Alfred Leslie is another artist who has continually challenged himself and convention. John Myers, who gave Leslie his first solo exhibition in 1951 at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, recalls Leslie as fiercely independent, as wanting to redefine art in his own way. "He had picked up the whole vocabulary of his older contemporaries, the Abstract Expressionists, and given it a precocious new twist. 'Art,' Alfred would explain, 'begins with me.'" ¹⁶ Although his work in the Fifties owed much to Motherwell and de Kooning, Leslie eventually abandoned abstraction and by the mid-Sixties had moved into realistic painting. He also began making films, one of which, Pull My Daisy, was a collaboration with Frank O'Hara. His work in theatre and other media has been more extensive and deliberate than that of the other seven artists, most of whom either abandoned or nearly abandoned set design after the Artists Theatre. Leslie, in contrast, designed sets for Herbert Machiz at Lakeside Summer Theatre for several seasons and also did the set for The Dybbuk, starring Morris Carnovsky.

Leslie feels comfortable working in other media for he sees painting, theatre and film as parts of the same whole. Even as a young boy, Leslie was interested in theatre. When

he was an adolescent, Piscator came to New York and began teaching and directing. Leslie saw several plays and attended his course on "World Theatre" at the New School. Looking back, he reflects that " it must have had an impact on me because I've always hated French art, and I hated French painting, but I always liked Dada and that spirit of German expressionist theatre."¹⁷

Like Larry Rivers, who expressed himself in music and poetry as well as painting, Alfred Leslie did not become a one-art artist. He not only made art and films but also was interested in literature. He published one issue of a large format literary magazine showcasing the work of poet friends such as Barbara Guest, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch and James Schuyler called The Hasty Papers, A One-Shot Review. He also wrote a short story that was going to be published in the journal Art and Literature. He stopped its publication, however, when he became worried that his filmmaking and literary interests might obscure his reputation as a painter.

Grace Hartigan, unlike Leslie, refers to the Artists Theatre as her "one shot" at theatre. She did not particularly like the pressure to collaborate nor the working atmosphere of theatre. Hartigan came to New York from Newark in 1947, leaving her conventional upbringing,

husband and child to become an artist. "Even as a child, I could always see the skyscrapers of New York. I knew I would be a painter . . . and the most exciting painting was going on in New York."¹⁸ According to John Myers, Hartigan was mostly self-educated as a painter. When she got to New York, she became an artists' model at the Art Students League. She later sought out those painters whom she most admired at the Cedar Bar and The Club, which were popular gathering places for the Abstract Expressionists.

Hartigan managed to make a reputation for herself in a time when women painters had difficulty being taken seriously. (She did, in fact, sign her paintings "George Hartigan" until 1953.) In 1950, Clement Greenberg selected her work for the "New Talent" exhibition, and in 1951, she had her first show at Tibor de Nagy. In 1959, Newsweek reported that, of all the paintings touring Europe in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition, "The New American Painting," Hartigan's work was among the most warmly received.

Critical hosannas in seven countries greeted the bold, vigorous, and often violent abstractions of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline But the most fervent praise frequently went to one of the youngest painters of the seventeen Americans represented -- and the only woman -- 37-year-old Grace Hartigan.¹⁹

Hartigan, like de Kooning, shows a strong interest in American urban life, its vitality and vulgarity. As with the other artists of the first and second generations, however, she explores the conflicts between abstraction and representation.

What I would really like is impossible to do. I would like an imagery that would be absolutely specific but couldn't be read in any terms of the visual world. You couldn't say 'That is a hand, that is a leg, this is a dish, this is a tree.' It would be totally clear as an image but you could not specifically identify it. It would be interchangeable with many things.²⁰

Hartigan finds drawing to be one way of being specific in painting. She compares it to writing: "You can read a line in a painting almost the way you can read a word. Drawing is really like writing poetry."²¹ In the Fifties, the heyday of abstraction, Hartigan's experiments with imagery and specificity provoked negative feedback from purists. Her "City Life" exhibitions in 1954 and 1957, for example, which featured paintings inspired by her experiences on the Lower East Side, were criticized by some older artists such as Kline and Guston, who made Hartigan feel her work "wasn't serious. Subject matter must come from the act of painting."²² Their criticism threw Hartigan into an aesthetic crisis, and it was not until the late 1960's that she broke through to an imagery with which she again felt comfortable.

Jane Freilicher too had to deal with the relative unpopularity of "realism" in the fifties. Freilicher painted, and continues to paint, pictures that have recognizable subject matter. Today, for example, she still paints the landscapes and cityscapes with which she began her career. Although excited by work that exposes the process of the artist, she questions the merits of pure abstraction:

Nature is so peculiar that reliance on the external fact is not necessarily inhibiting and can tend toward greater freedom from logical or rational considerations. People who²³ "expose their subconscious" often expose dull material.

A realist in a time of abstractionists or near-abstractionists, Freilicher did occasionally become apprehensive about her approach. In a 1957 interview, she observed that too many modern paintings resemble electro-cardiograms, while at the same time admitting, "Every so often I get an anxious feeling and would like to produce the bombed-out effect of modern painting."²⁴ Nevertheless, she feels realistic painting, though often underrated and misunderstood, is right for her.

A realist painter doesn't copy forms from nature any more than an abstract painter -- I don't stick to actual color that closely. Often before I start a painting I want it to be a certain²⁵ color and then I try to fit the painting to this color.

Each painting, for Freilicher, is an experiment, an education. "I am relearning to paint with each new canvas." Her process is exploratory, she often simply begins a painting and then must "paint her way out of a picture."²⁶

In his autobiography, John Myers describes Jane Freilicher as having a wittiness, intelligence and sensitivity that drew others to her, particularly the poets. One close friend was Nell Blaine, who inspired Freilicher to study painting. "Nell Blaine was the first real artist I'd met. She infused me with zeal, " says Freilicher. Blaine came to New York in 1942, fleeing the conventionality of her native Richmond, Virginia where "art was a genteel thing, prissy and somewhat bland."²⁷ On the basis of her personality and portfolio, Hans Hofmann gave her a scholarship to his studio, where she began to unlearn her conventional training and to develop a new aesthetic. Jazz also played an important role in Blaine's early artistic development, "she beat drums and improvised wild dance steps during all-night sessions, listening to records of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Lester Young."²⁸ She felt a kinship between the improvisations of jazz and abstract art and spent her first years in New York immersed not only in painting but in music. At twenty-two, Blaine became the youngest member of the American Abstract Artists. That same

year, she reached a turning point as an artist. She began to feel that her work was more organic, that she could reach inside and pull the work out of herself. "'Organic' is a word I'll stick by," asserts Blaine. "It means the work is an extension of your blood and body; it has the rhythm of nature."²⁹

The artists of the early wave exhibited mainly in three galleries, Jane Street and Hansa (which were co-operatives) and Tibor de Nagy, the commercial gallery run by John Myers. The tireless Blaine often acted as a coordinator for the Jane Street Gallery, organizing so many activities and exhibitions that friends nicknamed the co-op, "The Blaine Street Gallery."³⁰ According to Irving Sandler, Blaine proved to be not only an organizer but an artistic leader among the painters who exhibited at the Jane Street Gallery from 1944-49. "They followed no single aesthetic, but Blaine was the prime mover." As happened to other Jane Street painters, many of whom were former students of Hofmann, Blaine's work and influences changed over time. "In the late forties, the artists in her circle were influenced by Mondrian, Arp, and Leger. During the following decade, she and other Jane Street artists turned from abstract to figurative painting, influenced mainly by Bonnard, Soutine, Cezanne and de Kooning."³¹

A schism began developing in the late forties between Blaine and other painters influenced by European art and those who felt that Abstract Expressionism should be synonymous with American art. About this time, Blaine began to move away from pure abstraction toward a more realistic mode, depicting natural light and landscapes not unlike those of the Impressionists. By the mid-Fifties, she had made the painful transition from pure abstraction to more realistic painting. During that period, she had also extended her scope, designing costumes, sets and posters for the performances of modern dancer Mimi Farihi and for the Artists Theatre.

In Originals: American Women Artists, Eleanor Munro speculates that "the very labelling of first and second generation carries as much implication of gender as of primacy." She points out that although many women of the second generation, such as Nell Blaine, began exhibiting in commercial galleries at the same time as the men of the first generation, they ended up being labeled as a part of the later generation because their work took longer to gain public prominence. ³²

Elaine de Kooning also began painting in the 1940's. She soon made a name for herself as both a painter and a critic. Frank O'Hara described her as "The White Goddess:

she knew everything, told little of it, though she talked a lot, and we all adored (and adore) her."³³ Born in New York, she began studying art in 1936 at the Leonardo da Vinci Art School and later at the American Artists School. Her first paintings were greatly influenced by the politically conscious murals of Orozco and Diego Rivera, by Goya and Daumier. She painted scenes from the Spanish Civil War, gory pictures of "women reaching toward the sky with blood running down their arms." A turning point in her career was the day when she brought Bill de Kooning, then a friend, to her studio to see her work. "Why don't you just paint a still life?" he asked her. She began painting in his studio, learning a new way of seeing. "He'd say, 'Look, how this sits there . . . ' He'd use that term often, and it would be as if you had never seen a cup before."³⁴

The two married in 1943 and Elaine de Kooning began writing criticism for Art News in 1948, the same month as her husband's first show. His work was not yet selling, and she recalls having "this ludicrous idea that I could make money writing reviews." The reviews only brought in two dollars apiece, but de Kooning enjoyed the challenge of writing and analysis. "The revelations that even bad art offered were a surprise," she recalls.³⁵

Although she was influenced by the work of her husband (from whom she amicably separated in 1956), her imagery and artistic path have been distinctively individual. She has pursued portrait painting (in 1961, she was commissioned to paint President Kennedy), cylindrical painting, large-scale landscapes (with the help of aluminum pipes to hold her brushes, she painted the Rockies on a canvas twenty feet wide and ten feet high). For a while, she concentrated on abstract compositions of athletes, using magazine covers as an inspiration. Later, de Kooning did a series of paintings of bullfights. In the Sixties, she began to work with sculpture. "Some artists, of course, cling to one way of painting," she notes. "I try to avoid that. That's why I keep changing media, sizes, subjects." ³⁶ Her attraction to designing for the Artists Theatre was, in part, the chance to vary all three, but especially size: "We all liked the idea of working on that scale. My paintings at the time were only about six feet high. So it was interesting to work on a different scale, to keep the whole stage in mind."³⁷

Al Kresch was pleased to be asked to design for the Artists Theatre not only because of the challenge but because he had always been a bit stagestruck, even as boy. "When I was fourteen," he recalls, "my brother-in-law had the concession in a Second Avenue Theatre. I would hawk

candy and wander backstage." Hidden in the wings, he discovered a new world, filled with glamorous people and bright lights, an uplifting place that stood in sharp contrast to the outside world, New York City in the depression. Kresch recalls being "very thrilled with it -- the darkness, the colors, the excitement."³⁸ Kresch's fascination with theatre extended well beyond his adolescence. While at Brooklyn College, he designed sets for many shows. He also worked with Nell Blaine and others in a theatre benefit for the Jane Street Gallery: together they created sets for a Lorca play done in 1945 at the Provincetown Playhouse.

Kresch had one-man shows at the Jane Street Gallery in 1946 and 1948. In 1953, he exhibited in a two-man show at Tibor de Nagy. The following year, he was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to go to Europe where he was finally able to see at firsthand the Venice he had envisioned for James Merrill's play, The Bait. Like many of the other Jane Street artists, Kresch had studied with Hans Hofmann. In fact, he was the first to greet Nell Blaine at the door of Hofmann's studio. Her first image of the studio was candlelit, as he recalls:

This one night, the lights had blown but we stayed there talking. There was a knock at the door and it was Nell Blaine, she had arrived from Virginia that day. Her

teacher had told her so much about Hofmann that she found a furnished room and then came directly to the studio.³⁹

Blaine's enthusiasm seems to have been characteristic of the painters who designed for the Artists Theatre. They had enough energy not only for their primary work, painting, but for projects outside their medium. To them, poetry and theatre were a stimulus, another way of developing themselves and their art, of defying any and all limitations.

In a sense, the involvement of these seven painters in the Artists Theatre grew naturally out of their social and professional relationships with John Bernard Myers and with the poets. "We were already collaborating in all kinds of ways in each other's work and lives. We were all creatively entwined," Grace Hartigan recalls. Although John Myers orchestrated many of the collaborations and certainly served as a catalyst, ultimately they were the result of "simultaneous combustion." "Frank [O'Hara] would see a painting and put that painting in his poetry; the painters would put Frank in their paintings," according to Hartigan.⁴⁰ James Schuyler wrote a play about Jane Freilicher (later done at the Artists Theatre) while Frank O'Hara often used her as a subject in his poems. Together, poets and painters, such as Rivers and O'Hara, created "hybrids" (to use John Ashbery's term) such as

"poem-paintings."⁴¹ In addition, many of the painters designed the pamphlets of poems published by John Myers.

Often, the poets and painters would respond to each other's work with their art. This kind of artistic exchange was particularly valuable to the young painters, most of whom were not yet receiving recognition. To them, the poets' intense reaction to their work provided a much needed dose of encouragement. "I never felt so effectual as the first time I saw a painting of mine used in Frank's poem," recalls Grace Hartigan. "I knew that he had not just experienced my painting passively, but it meant so much to him that it entered into his own art."⁴²

The poets and painters not only liked each other but felt a natural affinity for each other's work. Both groups were striking out in new directions, attempting to be adventurous in their respective media. Sometimes, their ideas on painting and art converged. For example, both painters and poets became interested in the new emphasis on process, on a work of art being about its creation. "Painters would find painting in doing the painting, poets found exciting the idea of finding the poem in writing the poem," Grace Hartigan observes.⁴³ While Jane Freilicher does not recall being directly influenced by the poets, she did see similarities between their work and her

own. In their poetry, she found "a feeling for informality, a straightforwardness, an attitude of no pretension, no pomposity, a certain sophistication and an awareness of life on many levels. I don't know whether that was reflected in my work but it was something that I was aware of and felt was interesting to me."⁴⁴

This natural affinity between the two groups led to the poets' becoming the painters' ideal critics. When Ashbery, O'Hara, Guest and Schuyler became freelance critics for Art News, their pieces proved to be among the most popular and welcome among the painters. The poets recognized that "artists don't want to be criticized, they want to be understood," says Grace Hartigan.⁴⁵ Like many of the other painters, she felt that the poets went out of their way to illuminate the art. They sought to reveal the paintings rather than judge them. Their approach was somewhat unorthodox as Rudy Burckhardt, a photographer and filmmaker, recalls. He labels their criticism, "parallel poetry," seeing it as a kind of responsive writing, a co-existing art form that seeks to illuminate painting without necessarily being directly about the painting itself:

In the the 50's, our friends, the poets -- Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and Jimmy Schuyler -- were all writing art reviews for Tom Hess and Art News. They

used to write these lively pieces. But people would object. They'd say, "he's not really criticizing the painting, he's not talking about the painting." This is parallel poetry and it's great. For instance, you write something and you have a subject in mind a little bit, and then you write something else.⁴⁶

Elaine de Kooning, a critic herself, believes that the poets were more sympathetic to the painters than the regular art critics partially because they could better appreciate the labor that went into a work of art. The poets were a part of the painters' daily lives and there was a constant exchange of studio visits. No one waited for an exhibition or publication to share their work. "The poets would show us their poems as they finished them; they would see our paintings as we finished painting them."⁴⁷

Geographic proximity made it easy for artists and poets to drop by each other's homes and studios. Most lived in Greenwich Village, which as Alfred Leslie points out, was still a "lovely, charming little village" with a park not unlike that described by Henry James in Washington Square.⁴⁸

Living in the same neighborhood gave the artists the best of both worlds. They could work in isolation without feeling alienated and unsupported. John Myers was particularly adept at using the community to keep the artists' spirits high. In addition to providing low-budget dinners for his "starving artists" ("Eggplant Divine"), he also

tried to celebrate their accomplishments, large and small. For example, Grace Hartigan recalls his making the completion of each of her paintings into a party. He would bring over the poets and "make it into an event."⁴⁹

The painters and poets not only met in each other's homes and studios but would also gather at the Cedar Tavern and The Club, places made popular by the first generation. Weekly panels, lectures and even dances were given at the Club. As Irving Sandler points out in The New York School, "Geographic proximity gave rise to the constant exchange of studio visits that wove together the artists' community and encouraged further meeting in public places."⁵⁰

They also gathered to support each other at arts events. As Al Leslie recalls, "If there was a reading, all the painters would be there. If there was an opening, all the poets would be there. It was a very small group and very committed to ideas." There was a particular sensibility, a "taste that brought everybody together, an interest in modernism and a certain attitude toward the theatre."

If you went to John Cage's concert or if you went to Merce Cunningham's concert -- there was one audience. I mean, how many people wanted to see John Cage's radio concert? To see a guy standing up there conducting 40 radios. It seemed like insanity. But all the painters and poets went. That's how small the community was.

And, that's how isolated it was to be making that particular kind of art.⁵¹

The work they sought out was what we might now call "experimental" but at the time, the term had a negative connotation. According to Leslie, it implied that you were doing something just to try it out. "But this wasn't a try-out, you weren't experimenting, you were simply defining the process of art." After World War II, artists felt an urgent need to rebuild, renew and redefine what they were doing. In their search to define a new kind of art, the poets and painters eagerly sampled music, ballet and painting. "It was like a ferment of the arts," recalls Jane Freilicher.⁵²

The painters and poets already had a cross-disciplinary orientation so it was not difficult for John Myers to interest them in collaborating in the Artists Theatre. The poets were, for the most part, eager to attempt to write plays or to have their previously written plays produced. The painters were equally enthused; in most cases, they got involved just for the thrill of trying something new. For some, it was also a chance to further fulfill and establish themselves as artists. Larry Rivers recalls thinking, "If I could make a stage set, then I could be a REAL artist. Everything that we did gave us a little more stature in our own minds."⁵³

The Artists Theatre became a social as well as an artistic outing for the painters and poets. It fit well into the framework of their lives and their community, a community which Al Leslie describes as almost "tribal." "It was always a group function. Everybody wasn't family and everybody wasn't always friends, it was tribal in the way all groups are." Myers selected these particular poets and painters partly because of this cohesiveness. They may not have been the only or even the best poets and painters around whom to form a theatre, but they "belonged" to a specific artistic circle, as Leslie points out, "Certainly there were other painters who could have contributed, certainly there were other poets, but it was this community of taste that was involved in it."⁵⁴

It was also a "community of the spirit," according to Leslie. The Artists Theatre was a shoestring operation, similar to the gallery run by Myers. No one expected to make money; they simply came together for the "thrill of it," says Grace Hartigan.⁵⁵

There was virtually no budget for set design. As a result, the artists had to be extremely resourceful. Elaine de Kooning recalls being handed seventeen dollars by John Myers for the set of Presenting Jane. At that point, she remembers, she began walking the streets, searching the

gutter for materials. After four hours, she found a frame large enough to create an enormous screen. She then managed to convince a photographer friend to donate enough paper to cover the frame. Grace Hartigan remembers dressing the stage with her own furniture and spending her tiny budget on brown paper to paint as a backdrop. Nell Blaine does not remember any budget. After having worked with John Myers on other projects, she was used to having to scramble for money and materials. In addition to designing the Ashbery show, Blaine served as publicist for the theatre, creating low-budget flyers, programs and brochures.

For the most part, the painters and poets did not balk at the small budgets or haphazard management of the theatre. In fact, a number of them even went on the radio to get some free publicity for the theatre. (The effort backfired, however, when the talk got so risqué that they were almost thrown off the air.) In some respects, the tiny budgets and semi-chaotic organization of the theatre proved to be an advantage. "We could do what we wanted since we weren't getting paid and weren't being told much," says Nell Blaine.⁵⁶

Although there were occasional tantrums and temperamental tirades, most of the time, the theatre was fun. "It felt like play," recalls Jane Freilicher. The small

theatre, the lack of money ("all I probably had was a bucket of paint"), and the absence of much technical apparatus also made it less intimidating for the painters, some of whom, like herself, were apprehensive about working in another medium. "For everybody, it was like putting up a few paintings or props, or something that would be done in the style of the artist."⁵⁷

Like Freilicher, some artists see their contributions to the Artists Theatre as an extension of the work that they were doing in the Fifties. Larry Rivers notes that "one of the pieces onstage resembled an armature of what I'd been creating in sculpture" while Alfred Leslie actually used an existing painting for the Parker Tyler play, The Screen.⁵⁸ Jane Freilicher recalls her set design for The Lady's Choice as being fairly similar to her painting, particularly in terms of the process. "I don't really make sketches. Suggested themes come up in my work and I take off from there. I have this compulsion to jump in and then sort of work my way out."⁵⁹ For The Lady's Choice, for example, Freilicher began painting directly on the wall of the theatre, without any advance drawings.

Although Freilicher felt her work had to be more specific in order to complement the play, neither she nor the other painters aimed for theatrical design that was more

illusionistic than their regular work. Nell Blaine, who was, at the time, moving into more figurative painting, even found herself reaching back to abstraction in order to accommodate John Ashbery's play, The Heroes. "The nature of John's play dictated the style. Thus, some stage pieces were abstract, some more figurative."⁶⁰

In retrospect, however, most artists do see significant differences between designing for the Artists Theatre and painting on their own. Larry Rivers points out that a set designer, is, by definition, more of an "illustrator," his work must serve the play. Although he does not regret his past work in theatre, Rivers now prefers to concentrate on painting. Al Kresch also sees theatre design as "a bit foreign to painting." Kresch, who has developed a teaching as well as a painting career, never returned to theatre after designing The Bait. "It was a challenge at the time but I didn't have a yen to go further than that," says Kresch.⁶¹

Elaine de Kooning's main disappointment with the Artists Theatre was that she did not have a chance to collaborate on other aspects of the production. According to de Kooning, the painters went into the Artists Theatre thinking that "we would have our fingers in every pot. We thought we were there not only to do designs but would be

able to make suggestions about how the play was directed." After sitting in on a few rehearsals, however, de Kooning discovered that her advice was not welcome or appreciated. Grace Hartigan, on the other hand, found herself wanting to be less involved in rehearsals, with their personality clashes and prima donnas turns. Despite the laissez-faire atmosphere of the Artists Theatre, she missed the autonomy of painting. "I did the sets for Red Riding Hood and swore I'd never work in the theatre again. Collaboration is not really my thing."⁶²

Nell Blaine did not object to collaboration in general but found it difficult to work with director Herbert Machiz, who, she felt, did not supply the right kind or amount of direction to the painters. "I don't know if it was insecurity or a desire to be spontaneous but he would never tell us (accurately, at least) how long or important a scene would be," recalls Blaine. As a result, she spent most of her time designing a supposedly "big" scene for The Heroes that ended up lasting only a few seconds. Al Leslie also had some later conflicts with Machiz. Generally, however, he has found it easy to cross back and forth between painting and theatre. "Working in theatre has never been a problem for me," says Leslie who feels that all of his artistic

endeavors are linked and "informed by the same body of ideas."⁶³

Despite some present misgivings about theatre, most of the artists recall the Artists Theatre as a positive experience. It was a chance to try another medium, to stretch their art. The Artists Theatre helped them to promote themselves and their friends and to contribute further to the artistic life of a community that nourished them both socially and professionally.

Notes to Chapter 1

¹ Irving Sandler, The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 1.

² Ibid., ix.

³ Ibid, p. 1.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Willem de Kooning, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," Museum of Modern Art Bulletin 18 (Spring 1951): 5-6.

⁶ Sandler, p. 1.

⁷ Ibid., p. 90.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Frank O'Hara, "Larry Rivers: Why I Paint As I Do," Horizon (September-October 1959), p. 98.

¹⁰ Sandler, p. ix.

¹¹ Charlotte Rubinstein, American Women Artists: From Early Indian Times to the Present (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982), p. 287.

¹² Contemporary Artists, 2nd ed., s.v. "Rivers, Larry," by Bazarov, Konstantin.

¹³ O'Hara, p. 98.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Interview with Larry Rivers, Telephone, 14 March 1988.

¹⁶John Bernard Myers, Tracking the Marvelous: A Life in the New York Art World (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 139.

¹⁷Interview with Alfred Leslie, New York City, 19 February 1988.

¹⁸"The Rawness, The Vast", Newsweek, 11 May 1959, p. 113.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Allen Barber, "Making Some Marks", Arts Magazine 48 (June 1974): 51.

²¹Ibid., p. 50.

²²Eleanor Munro, Originals: American Women Artists (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), p. 203.

²³Fairfield Porter, "Jane Freilicher Paints a Picture," Art News 55 (September 1956): 65.

²⁴Ibid., p. 47

²⁵Ibid., p. 49.

²⁶Munro, p. 205.

²⁷Munro, pp. 261, 263.

²⁸Rubinstein, p. 286.

²⁹Munro, p. 268.

³⁰Rubinstein, p. 287.

³¹Sandler, p. 36.

³²Munro, p. 201.

³³Sandler, p. 37.

³⁴Munro, p. 252-253.

³⁵Ibid., p. 254, 256.

³⁶Ibid., p. 260.

³⁷Interview with Elaine de Kooning, Telephone, 8 April 1988.

³⁸Interview with Albert Kresch, Telephone, 28 May 1988.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Interview with Grace Hartigan, New York City, 5 March 1988.

⁴¹A poem-painting is a joint collaboration between the poet and artist, in which both play an equal role; i.e. the artist is more than an illustrator. One example is Stones by Larry Rivers and Frank O'Hara.

⁴²G. Hartigan.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Interview with Jane Freilicher, New York City, 23 March 1988.

⁴⁵G. Hartigan.

⁴⁶Simon Pettet, Conversations with Rudy Burckhardt About Everything (New York: Vehicle Editions, 1987), p. 14.

⁴⁷E. De Kooning.

⁴⁸Interview with Alfred Leslie, New York City, 19 February 1988.

⁴⁹G. Hartigan.

⁵⁰Sandler, p. 30.

⁵¹A. Leslie.

⁵²A. Leslie; J. Freilicher.

⁵³Interview with Larry Rivers, Telephone, 14 March 1988.

⁵⁴A. Leslie.

⁵⁵G. Hartigan.

⁵⁶Interview with Nell Blaine, New York City, 13 April 1988.

⁵⁷J. Freilicher.

⁵⁸L. Rivers.

⁵⁹J. Freilicher.

⁶⁰N. Blaine.

⁶¹L. Rivers; A. Kresch.

⁶²E. de Kooning; G. Hartigan.

⁶³N. Blaine; A. Leslie.

Of the twelve playwrights whose plays were produced by the Artists Theatre, seven are still alive and living in New York City. The other four, Frank O'Hara, Tennessee Williams, Parker Tyler, and V.R. Lang are deceased, as, of course, is the Spanish playwright García Lorca. Of the living playwrights, four are leading major American poets: Kenneth Koch, James Merrill, James Schuyler and John Ashbery. Barbara Guest is recognized not only for her poetry but for her books on art and literature. Lionel Abel and Robert Hivnor are better-known for their plays and, in the case of Abel, his theatre criticism.

Critics often group Koch, Ashbery, Schuyler, Guest and the late Frank O'Hara together, labeling them "the New York School." The New York School is said to be linked by period as well as by stylistic consistencies and influences.

[It] flourished in the 1950's in close conjunction with the abstract expressionist movement then in ascendancy in painting and especially with the work of the restive, rebellious abstract artist Larry Rivers. In varying degrees and ways the three poets [Ashbery, Koch, and O'Hara] applied the principles of abstract expressionism to verbal constructs, using words abstractly and evocatively.

The poets generally credit John Myers with first applying the "New York School" label to them and their poetry. Previously, it had been used only to describe visual artists. (The New York School of Painting included de

Kooning, Hofmann and other abstract expressionists.) In 1973, Myers published an anthology entitled The Poets of the New York School which included the work of Ashbery, Koch, Merrill, Guest, Schuyler and O'Hara among others. In his introduction, he gives some of his reasons for grouping them together. First, they were distinguished by their sense of community and mutual support and by their separateness from the literary establishment. Second, they were all heavily influenced by painting and sculpture. "For the poets included in this book there was no resisting the pull which these artists exerted." He argues that it was art, rather than literature, which provided them with the true stimulus for their work. Furthermore, these poets were distinguished by their influence on and involvement with the artists of the period. According to Myers, "a thoroughly symbiotic situation developed, resulting in a long-term series of collaborations of every conceivable nature."²

The poets generally do not take exception to any of Myers's claims. Nevertheless, they resist the label because, in addition to being ambiguous, it implies stylistic similarities among their works. According to John Ashbery, Myers's major motivation for labelling the young poets, "The Poets of the New York School" was to bring them together into a recognizable group. Ashbery notes that "the idea was

that some of the prestige of the New York School of Painters would naturally rub off on us poets who were not well known." As the years have gone by, however, Ashbery admits that the term has become an "albatross," because it has no clear meaning. "It was coincidental that we all knew each other and met John Myers, were published by him and were ever after referred to as a School. But except for a shared belief in experimentation, a kind of anti-establishment bias, I think that the differences among us are such that the "School" label doesn't make much sense. But that's probably true of all such labels."³ Most of the poets would agree, however, that they shared an interest in art and that their involvement with the abstract expressionists influenced their lives and, to some degree, their work.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, many of the poets became art critics for Art News. It was an enjoyable, although not terribly profitable freelance job (the going rate in the late 1940's was two dollars a review) for the poets that did not tie them down from nine to five. It also allowed them to expand on the informal education that many of them were already receiving in the visual arts. Barbara Guest, for example, knew very little about art until she became friendly with Tony Smith, a driving force in the "first" generation. Guest recalls her initial reaction to

the paintings she saw at his home. "I looked at a Rothko and told him, 'I don't understand it.' He said, 'You will' and, of course, I later did."⁴

Smith, who had an interest in both literature and art ("He had his students study painting by reading the 'great books,'" Guest recalls), was partially responsible for starting the Club, the great meeting place of the first, and later the second, generation of Abstract Expressionist painters. The Club also welcomed the poets and their work. "At the Club, painters read early poems of me, O'Hara, Ashbery," says Guest. "They were very enthusiastic and excited. The painters always knew our work."⁵ The poets became part of the Club's weekly panels, as did John Myers and the painters who would later collaborate in the Artists Theatre. Irving Sandler points out that "as early as 1952, members of the early wave were asked to participate in the Friday night panels; e.g. a panel on Abstract Expressionism was composed of Freilicher, Hartigan, Leslie, [Joan] Mitchell, O'Hara and Rivers, and moderated by J.B. Myers."⁶

Guest began writing for Art News at the encouragement of another artist, Bob DeNiro. "I was living on Christopher Street in a coldwater flat and Bob DeNiro, Sr. would come around and we would talk about poetry and so on. He suggested that I go to work for Art News. He knew that Tom

Hess, who was the editor, was particularly interested in having poets write about art." For Guest, the experience proved to be a turning point. Reviewing for Art News "really changed my life," she says. It also affected her career, pulling her in new, sometimes distracting directions. "I became very involved with painters, even more so than poets. My involvement went on for years. I wrote articles and reviews. Finally, I found painting took up too much of my time."⁷

Although John Ashbery would eventually become the editor for Art News as well as a highly respected critic, he, like Guest, recalls knowing little about artists or art prior to coming to New York. "I arrived in New York right after I graduated from Harvard in 1949. And, immediately through Kenneth [Koch] , met Jane Freilicher and Larry Rivers. I don't think I had known any painters before that." The late Forties were, of course, a providential time for the young poets to "happen upon" the New York art world. As Ashbery recalls, "It was the beginning of the explosion of American art after the war and they [Rivers and Freilicher] were both trying different things constantly." Ashbery's circle of artist friends quickly expanded. He met Nell Blaine and Al Kresch, then became friendly with John

Myers and the new artists he was showing, Grace Hartigan and Alfred Leslie.⁸

Impressed by the painters' independence and unconventionality, Ashbery and other poets forged friendships with their young counterparts in the visual arts. The two groups had much in common: almost everyone was undiscovered and they shared a desire to break new ground in their respective media. Ashbery remembers those years as a time of exploration, of trying to absorb as much as possible. He was energetic and always searching, as were the other poets and painters. "We were always sort of prowling around looking for something in the arts to hit us, whether it be movies or concerts or art exhibitions."⁹

Ashbery found the painters and their work to be particularly stimulating. Everything about them was novel: their environment, their medium, even the size of their canvases.

It was quite exciting to go visit one's friends' studios to see what they'd been up to lately, and to have such a visible record of it, rather different from going to a poet friend who might pull poems out of a drawer and read them. That would be interesting. But in this case, being in what was usually a very small, coldwater flat with these big paintings staring at you, you felt very much exposed to them and probably it helped set one's own creative juices running.¹⁰

Ashbery's almost visceral response to paintings resembles that of many other poets, according to Barbara Guest. In her opinion, poets have a natural affinity with painting: they do not see it as a foreign or unrelated art form because poets and painters react to the world in a similar way, "they share the same experience." For this reason, these two creative groups tend to "click" both professionally and socially. "Painters are really wonderful with poets," says Guest. "They talk more with them than with art critics. They are more at ease, they speak the same language."¹¹

The painters may have also preferred the poets to the regular reviewers because of the former's unconventional approach to art criticism. As mentioned in Chapter 1, most of the poets attempted a kind of "parallel poetry" in writing about the art. Their aim was not to judge but rather to find an appropriate artistic response to each painting. As Guest explains, "You cannot describe a painting, you have to relate it to something in your own art form, you have to use it somehow in your work." Guest finds herself responding in a strong and spontaneous way to painting. She feels an "instinctive alliance" with certain paintings, a strong identification that makes her want to react to those paintings in her own work, perhaps, even

include them in her poetry. For example, she is trying to integrate a painting by Picasso into an upcoming poem about Alexander the Great: "I want to get that painting into this poem."¹²

Guest has found that paintings can serve not only as an inspiration for poems but can also be helpful in solving artistic dilemmas. She recalls wrestling with a particular poem, writing it over and over but never being quite satisfied with the result. Eventually, a chance look at a Matisse painting helped her to solve "the problem of the poem." Not just the image, but the discovery of the artist's sense of fun and intelligence stimulated her work. Sometimes, Guest will identify with a painting that seems to speak directly to what she has already written and thought. It is almost as though she is thinking along parallel lines with certain painters. For example, she found the cover for her current book, Fair Realism, by chance. "I went into an artist's studio and saw a painting and said, "That's Fair Realism, that's what I'm writing about."¹³

Guest feels that she, as an individual, has been especially drawn to painting because she relates to the world more as a visual artist than a writer. "I have a more visual memory. If I have a conversation, I remember not what was said but the structure of the room. I never took

notes when reviewing, I could always recall what I saw." Guest found and continues to find painting helpful to her writing. "I learned a lot about poetry from painting," she states. She also claims to have learned a lot about life. As a young woman in the forties and even today, she continues to be impressed by the "liveliness of life" that characterizes her painter friends.¹⁴

Like Guest, Ashbery has maintained a lifelong interest in the visual arts and acknowledges the impact of painting on his poetry. Not just the paintings themselves but the way the painters approached their work, the way they defined their art, impressed him. When asked to identify those aspects of painting that influenced his poetry, Ashbery focuses on the painters' improvisatory style and their emphasis on process:

I think just the fact that it was sheer improvisation and totally open-ended. The painters would just start painting without knowing what they were doing, which has become the way I write. Also, when completed, the painting was really nothing more than a history of its own creation.¹⁵ I don't know why that appeals to me but it did and does.

In retrospect, it makes sense that these "crazy young poets," as Alfred Leslie recalls them, allied themselves with their equally independent-minded counterparts in the visual arts.¹⁶ As Barbara Guest points out, the older, more mainstream poets may also have kept up with art but mainly

"because they wanted to be cultivated" rather than because they felt any strong identification with the process, the paintings or the painters.¹⁷

Most of the young poets were unknown and unrecognized at the time that John Myers recruited them to write or submit plays to the Artists Theatre. Guest, for example, had had only one poem appear in the Partisan Review. Nevertheless, Myers solicited her play for the theatre and later published the first collection of her poems with woodblocks by Robert Goodnough. (Later on, Joan Mitchell did a painting of the 1960 pamphlet entitled "The Green Book of Barbara Guest.")

Guest has gone on to become a noted biographer and art critic as well as a poet. She has received a number of writing awards including a Yaddo Fellowship and grants from the Longview Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. Aside from her nine volumes of poetry, she has written two biographies, Robert Goodnough and Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and Her World, a book on Hilda Doolittle. After The Lady's Choice, Guest wrote three more plays, two of which were produced in New York in the 1960's by a company with similar ambitions to the original Artists Theatre. This company, organized by Diana diPrima, was also called the Artists Theatre and did plays not only by Barbara

Guest but also by the poets James Schuyler and Kenward Elmslie.

Of the poets "discovered" by John Myers, John Ashbery is the most celebrated. In addition to the MacArthur "genius" award given to him in 1987, Ashbery has also received, among other awards, the Pulitzer Prize, two Guggenheim Fellowships and the National Book Award. Ashbery has written four plays in addition to The Heroes, which was first produced by the Living Theatre. One, The Compromise, was done in 1956 by the Poets Theatre of Cambridge, a company begun in Boston by V.R. Lang with similar aspirations to those of the Artists Theatre. Another, The Philosopher, was produced in London in 1982.

Although Ashbery does not generally collaborate with painters, he has worked with other poets such as Kenneth Koch and James Schuyler. Schuyler and he wrote a novel together entitled A Nest of Ninnies, which was published in 1969. Ashbery is also recognized as an art critic, having edited a number of literary and art magazines including Art News and Art and Literature and served as a critic for national and international magazines, journals and newspapers. He has also published two books on artists, one on R.B. Kitaj and one on Fairfield Porter.

Unlike Ashbery's connection with painting, Kenneth Koch's has been more collaborative than critical. Since the 1950's, he has worked on projects ranging from poem-paintings to plays designed by and sometimes starring painters and other writers. The cast of The Election, done at the Living Theatre in 1960, for example, included Larry Rivers and Arnold Weinstein. Of all the poets, Koch has probably maintained the most active interest in theatre. He has written two screenplays and at least seventeen plays, of which he has directed two. A prolific writer, Koch has also published over fifteen volumes of poetry and received both a Fulbright and Guggenheim Fellowship, among other honors. In recent years, he has become well known not only as a poet but as an educator, his unusual methods of teaching creative writing to special populations such as children and senior citizens have gained national attention.

Like the other New York School poets, James Schuyler ventured into both theatre and the visual arts. Since Presenting Jane, which was produced both at the Poets Theatre of Cambridge and at the Artists Theatre, he has written two other plays, Shopping and Waiting (also presented in Cambridge) and Unpacking the Black Trunk (with Kenward Elmslie). He also created the libretto for Paul Bowles's A Picnic Cantata, recorded in 1955 by Columbia

Records. In addition to writing for Art News, Schuyler, like Frank O'Hara, was a staff member at the Museum of Modern Art. In 1979, he co-edited a book entitled Broadway: A Poets and Painters Anthology which featured the work of New York painters and poets. Although John Myers did not publish Salute, Schuyler's first collection of poems, the gallery did sponsor his second volume, May 24th or So in 1966. Schuyler went on to become an influential poet, garnering numerous honors for his work including the Frank O'Hara Prize, the Academy of American Poets Fellowship and the 1981 Pulitzer Prize.

James Merrill has also received the Pulitzer Prize (1977) as well as two National Book Awards and Yale University's Bollingen Prize. One of the first poets of the Artists Theatre group to achieve formal recognition, Merrill had his first book of poems, The Black Swan, published by Icarus in Athens in 1946, the year before he graduated from Amherst College. Within a few years after his graduation, he won several awards for poetry, including the Oscar Blumenthal prize in 1947, Poetry magazine's Levinson Prize in 1949 and the Harriet Monroe Memorial Prize in 1951. Although Myers was not the first to publish Merrill's work, he did include his poems in The Poets of the New York School, which is dedicated, in part, to Merrill.

Merrill became involved with the Artists Theatre during a period of self-discovery, when he turned to forms other than poetry. During the 1950's, he wrote a novel, The Seraglio, and two plays, The Bait and The Immortal Husband, both of which were produced at the Artists Theatre. (The BBC also produced a television version of The Bait in 1955.) Since that period, he has written only one novel, concentrating mainly on his poetry yet continuing to experiment with technique. Divine Comedies, the volume of verse for which he won the Pulitzer Prize, is part of a cosmic trilogy composed with the guidance of a Ouija Board.

The other two playwrights who contributed to this oral history, Lionel Abel and Robert Hivnor, are primarily playwrights, rather than poets, although their plays are often "poetic" in form and lie outside the mainstream of conventional drama. During the late forties and fifties, Abel and Myers worked together on literary/philosophical magazines such as View and Instead. Both shared a passion not only for the arts but for the new ideas being popularized by Europeans (some of whom had come to New York during the Second World War), philosophies and aesthetics such as existentialism and surrealism. In his autobiography, Myers recalls Abel as being the resident expert on all things French, he "seems to be more à la page

with regard to la vie intellectuelle de Paris than anyone in New York."¹⁸

Encouraged by Myers, Abel began playwriting. During the years covered by this study, 1953-56, he created two plays for the Artists Theatre, The Death of Odysseus and Absalom, which received the 1956 Obie Award. After 1956, he had two more plays produced in association with Herbert Machiz and John Myers, The Pretender and The Wives. Abel also became well known as a translator and an essayist, writing for Partisan Review, the New Republic, Dissent and Commentary. He published a collection of his theatre criticism, Metatheatre in 1963 and later a memoir, The Intellectual Follies, in 1984.

Unlike the other writers, Robert Hivnor was never a member of Myers's inner circle. He became involved in the Artists Theatre in its later years and in a more roundabout way. Myers approached him for his play, The Ticklish Acrobat, at a time when he was trying to "get going" in New York as a playwright. Encouraged by his agent, who felt that the downtown production could work as a showcase, Hivnor agreed.

Prior to the Artists Theatre production, Hivnor had had several plays staged. Martha Goodwin was produced in

1942 by the Yale School of Drama, although Hivnor was in the military overseas at the time, having been called away from his graduate studies. In 1946, he received his M.F.A. from Yale and went on to teach at the University of Minnesota which produced his second play, Too Many Thumbs. This play was later revived in New York at the Cherry Lane Theatre (1949), and also in London (1951). Following the production of The Ticklish Acrobat in 1954, Hivnor had two more plays produced in New York, The Assault Upon Charles Sumner (1964) and "I" "Love" "You" (1968). He contributed to the 1960's revue, "DMZ," and also became involved in a New York group called The Theatre of Ideas, which sponsored readings, productions and roundtable discussions. Another play, Love Reconciled to War, premiered in Baltimore in 1968.

Although he was not really a part of the poet-painter circle that made up the Artists Theatre, Hivnor, a former cartoonist and commercial artist, recalls being intrigued by the thought of having a real painter do the sets for his play. "There was also a certain cachet to the Artists Theatre, a certain esteem because of the group involved." 19

John Myers liked to see himself as being at the nucleus of that group and most of the poet-playwrights allied themselves with the Artists Theatre because of him, Hivnor being the exception. According to Ashbery, "Myers seemed to

have a knack for getting people interested in whatever he wanted them to be interested in."²⁰

Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery and Barbara Guest had gotten to know Myers through their network of artist friends while Lionel Abel knew him from moving within the same literary circles. James Schuyler had known Myers in high school while James Merrill had met him during a college vacation. After graduation, Merrill went to Europe for almost three years. When he returned to New York in 1952, he got in touch with Myers and subsequently "met lots of people all at once, poets and painters."²¹

Myers had himself moved to New York City in 1944 and, as Barbara Guest puts it, "started living out his fantasies."²² In his native Buffalo, he had staged marionette shows and later edited a literary magazine entitled Upstate. When Buffalo proved too limiting and unstimulating for his avant-garde tastes and ambitions, Myers moved to Manhattan. New York allowed him to indulge his "three passions: poetry and puppets and painting."²³ He became managing editor of View (edited by the late Parker Tyler, another of the Artists Theatre playwrights) and continued doing puppet shows. In addition, he began to develop his knowledge of and interest in art, taking art history courses with Meyer Schapiro at the New School. In

1951, after View folded, Myers founded a gallery with a partner, Tibor de Nagy, and began showing the works of young painters like Larry Rivers, Alfred Leslie and Grace Hartigan.

Myers had begun cultivating relationships with prominent artists well before the gallery opened, however. As Tibor de Nagy, who was his partner not only in the gallery but also in the marionette company, points out, Myers used even the puppet theatre as an entree to the art world. He got artists such as Jackson Pollock and Kurt Seligman to design the puppets. These early connections would later help Myers gain a foothold in the art world. "Without the marionettes we wouldn't have had our gallery, because that's how our contacts developed," says de Nagy.²⁴

Once the gallery was established, Myers had a new platform for promoting both visual and literary artists. In 1953, he began publishing a series of pamphlets by poets whom he liked and admired, designed by gallery artists of whom he was equally fond and supportive. In 1953, he published the first collection of John Ashbery poems, Turandot and Other Poems, designed by Jane Freilicher. That same year, Myers also published Kenneth Koch's first book, Poems, with woodblocks by Nell Blaine. The pamphlets, as Ashbery points out, served as a "relatively inexpensive way

of advertising the gallery"²⁵ They did not cost much (Kenneth Koch and Nell Blaine recall paying for their collaboration) and the poets and painters never saw any profit on them. Nonetheless, "it would be something he could hand to a potential buyer when he came into the gallery." Although Myers may have used the books to enhance the reputation of the gallery, he was never commercial about them, according to Kenneth Koch.

They got to be very rare books. They started off selling for two or three dollars and, in five or ten years, you could sell them for a hundred dollars but John always sold them for two or three. I asked him about this and he said, "I'm not a rare book dealer, I'm not trying to make a profit from poetry."²⁶

Shortly after opening the gallery, Myers met the theatre director Herbert Machiz. In 1952, they moved in together and began a relationship that would last until Machiz's death in 1978. Machiz had just returned from Europe, where he had originally gone on the first Fulbright Fellowship for drama. During his stay, he organized the American Theatre in Paris (an English-speaking theatre doing American plays) and also worked with the theatres of Orson Welles, Jean Cocteau, Louis Jouvet and Jean-Louis Barrault. Following his return to the U.S., he directed the first revival of The Glass Menagerie in New York in 1952. His later, more commercial, credits included the premiere of

Suddenly Last Summer as well as revivals of several other Tennessee Williams plays.

Meeting Machiz gave Myers a way to become further involved in theatre, it also gave him a new outlet for showcasing collaborations among his favorite poets and painters. Kenneth Koch explains the sequence of events in this way:

John Bernard Myers was interested, first in what he called the painters of the New York School. Then he got interested in Frank and John and Jimmy Schuyler and me as poets of the New York School. Then he met Herbert Machiz . . . and John saw yet another way to advance the cause of the New York School of painters and poets, or the painters and poets he knew and liked, and he had us do theatre works together since he now had a director whom he could work with. ²⁷

His timing could not have been better, according to Koch. Both the poets and painters welcomed the opportunity to try something different and to collaborate within the Village community. In addition, most of the poets and painters were eager for recognition, even the limited recognition that an off-Broadway production would bring. Myers "got talented young writers at a moment when they would have done anything to get their work done and got talented young painters at that same moment." At the time, most of these now celebrated poets were largely unpublished and unrecognized. As John Ashbery recalls, "In the early Fifties, I wasn't even known as poet and found it difficult

to get my work published in poetry magazines." Kenneth Koch remembers being so excited when John Myers proposed the idea to him that he agreed almost automatically. "I was so interested in having my work done or read or published or anything."²⁸

In Guest's opinion, the poets ultimately became more involved and more emotionally invested in the theatre than the painters. She felt that the painters approached the project with a different degree of intensity and interest than did the poets, partly because neither the career move nor the difference in medium was as great for them as for the poets. "None of the painters made a career out of theatrical painting. These people didn't look at it as a new way to paint. It generally didn't develop their style in any way. They just wanted to be part of it."²⁹ For the poets, however, writing for the theatre or even watching a previously written play put into production required a creative leap or, at the very least, an adjustment in attitude.

While some of the poets submitted plays that they had already written, Barbara Guest, James Merrill and Lionel Abel wrote the plays at John Myers's request. "We undertook it to be involved, to try a new form," explains Guest.³⁰ Although they had not written plays before, they knew that

their efforts would be taken seriously by Myers and that there was a good chance that their plays would reach the stage. Although some of the poets did not feel that writing plays required a special approach ("You call it something -- i.e., a play -- and everyone will accept it as such," Frank O'Hara is reputed to have said), most found that playwriting required a slightly different approach than poetry.³¹ At the very least, they had to consider audience and theatricality. James Merrill, for example, took an acting class, at the suggestion of Herbert Machiz who felt that it would "help me write for the theatre." Machiz taught the class and used Try! Try! for the class production, in which Merrill ended up playing the part of John.³²

Experimenting with a new form was not the only challenge that the poets faced. They joined the theatre because "everyone wanted to hear their words acted out," to see their work take on a new dimension. Most also were often eager to escape the natural solitude that envelops the writer. The changes brought about by their involvement proved, however, to be both thrilling and disturbing, as Guest explains:

The desire to work with other people is common for the writer until you get disillusioned. You find out no one does it the way that you want. It's not your interior concept but that of the director and the interior of the

director isn't your interior. As a result, it's never what you thought it was going to be.³³

According to the poets' recollections, giving up control and authority over their work was just as difficult for them as for "regular" playwrights. It may even have been harder since they knew less what to expect. Guest, for example, recalls being in a state of shock watching rehearsals ("most of us probably were"). Although she ultimately felt that the play played better than it read, it was still traumatic to let go of it. It was also not easy for a poet, perhaps even more so than your average playwright, to hear his work changed. Ashbery recalls: "I remember being upset by the fact that the actors would alter or improvise speeches which I'd written exactly the way I wanted them. I suppose this is something that happens to every playwright." Ashbery also remembers being upset that the director did not necessarily make the actors stick more religiously to the lines.³⁴

The idea of pleasing a theatre audience was also unfamiliar to the poets, whose poetry was mostly unpublished and whose former "audience" had consisted mainly of other poets and friends. "We wrote poetry because we liked to write it," explains Kenneth Koch, "eventually people would probably like it or they wouldn't. I didn't think much about an audience at that time."³⁵

The poets' lack of theatre experience (as well as their lack of status) also shielded them from disappointment. For example, they were not as upset by the shortage of publicity and formal recognition as seasoned playwrights might have been. "I was pretty naive about theatre then," recalls Kenneth Koch. "And at that time in my life I didn't expect to be reviewed and was not disappointed if I wasn't." It was not long, however, before the poets learned, through experience, about the theatre's hierarchy and internal politics. Kenneth Koch committed a major breach in theatre etiquette: "I came to rehearsal, and I didn't think someone was reading a line right so I told the actor. She began to cry. Then I realized the director was very upset . . . obviously, you're not supposed to talk directly to the actors -- I didn't even know that!"³⁶

The poets also were not sure how to communicate with the director chosen by John Myers. Machiz was confrontational, according to Robert Hivnor and others. He tended to react negatively to the poets' suggestions, listening only when he hit a real crisis. Hivnor, for example, went up to Machiz during a rehearsal and whispered a suggestion in his ear. Instead of either ignoring him or thanking him, Machiz created a scene. Turning to the actors,

he cried, "The playwright doesn't trust me! You have to have trust!"³⁷

Guest felt particularly at a loss with Machiz. Although she was friendly with and accepted by most of the artists and poets, being a woman put her outside the inner male, largely homosexual, circle of Machiz and Myers. As a result, she felt that Machiz and Myers were less receptive to her criticism and suggestions. Consequently, the production of The Lady's Choice proved to be a bittersweet experience for her. The play was well received by the audience but it created a rift in her relationship with John Myers. In retrospect, she almost regrets her efforts to take an active part in the production. "I wouldn't have complained if I'd realized that my voice would not be listened to."³⁸

Guest, like most of the poets, felt that Machiz was mismatched with the theatre, that, although he may have been excited about creating an Artists Theatre, it was beyond his capabilities and, perhaps, even his tastes. Kenneth Koch, for example, believes Machiz was more oriented toward the commercial theatre, that "he was more of a Broadwayish kind of director than our odd little poetic plays would have profited most from." Machiz's approach, according to Barbara

Guest, was heavy-handed, "whereas everything we did required lifting, spiritual lifting."³⁹

James Schuyler recalls Machiz having difficulties with his play, Presenting Jane, which was highly abstract and dadaist. "It wasn't supposed to make sense . . . and that was not an idea that Herbert could cope with. He was very into a kind of theatre of motivation." Looking back, Schuyler surmises that Herbert Machiz's orientation was in a direction quite different from that in which John Myers propelled him. "What John Myers wanted was a kind of poets' theatre. In Herbert, he had someone whose direction was entirely in another kind of theatre. He eventually directed a number of Tennessee Williams plays, and that was much more what Herbert was all about."⁴⁰

According to Barbara Guest, Machiz did not really have the right sensibilities to deal with either the people or the plays. He was, in most respects, an outsider, linked to their community only by his relationship with John Myers. He did not live among them nor was he an integral part of their artistic or personal lives. Guest explains, "Herbert was not in the same spirit as the rest of us. He was not a lover of poetry or painting."⁴¹

The poets, in general, found him too "bourgeois" and conventional, at least in relation to their deliberately avant-garde tastes. It was, therefore, difficult for them to take some of his more "traditional" suggestions seriously. "I remember him raving about character development," recalls Ashbery, who today still challenges the concept. "Why is this necessary onstage when a character often doesn't often develop in real life?" Machiz had such a hard time working with the lack of structure in the poetic dramas that eventually he refused to work on plays that, in his mind, lacked essential dramatic elements. As Kenneth Koch recalls, "At one point, John Myers said to me, 'Herbert doesn't want to do any more works that don't have character development.'"⁴²

In "The Challenge of a Poetic Theatre," an article in which Machiz looks back at his experiences with the Artists Theatre, he acknowledges that dealing with the poetic dramas was a challenge. They tended to be somewhat untheatrical, at least in the conventional American sense. "I was continually faced with the problem of transmuting literary language into dramatic action," recalls Machiz.⁴³

While he did not consider himself a traditionalist, Machiz felt that many of the plays, as written, would neither appeal nor be accessible to an audience. To remedy

this, he often tried to humanize the characters, to give them depth and motivation. According to Machiz, the drama he aimed for was not realistic but would contain enough recognizable theatrical elements to reach an audience. Although Machiz states that it is poetic drama that will ultimately "save" and reinvigorate the America theatre, he seems less than satisfied with the particular plays produced by the Artists Theatre. "The truth is that the plays we produced were often not very clearly written, and much subsequent unraveling of thought and motivation was necessary."⁴⁴ Committed as he was to the idea of a poetic theatre, he acknowledged the difficulties involved in ushering in the dramatic renaissance he sought.

Most of the poets are fairly quick to agree that Machiz, for all his faults, was working at a disadvantage. These plays were their earliest, in some cases, their first attempts at drama. Machiz may not have been the best director for their material but they too had something to learn. Lionel Abel points out that, although he was not always completely pleased with Machiz's direction, he felt that Machiz did have something very necessary to offer to the Artists Theatre. "He brought a kind of technical impatience. The literary person is thinking of literature, he isn't thinking of the stage effect. Machiz was always

trying to say, 'How it's gonna feel to someone sitting in the audience?' And that was good for us."⁴⁵

Barbara Guest agrees that the poets had something to learn but feels that Machiz did not know how to lead them in the right direction. In her opinion, the Artists Theatre never reached its full potential, and she lays part of the blame on the director.

The plays should have been better, the theatre should have been better. We could have had a real painters' and poets' theatre if Machiz had been a different person. We could have learned. We would have written better plays, learned to improve static moments. It could have gone on longer, really developed.⁴⁶

There was, of course, little likelihood of anyone replacing Machiz since Myers meant the Artists Theatre to be a vehicle for Machiz's career. Besides, as Grace Hartigan points out, Myers really believed in Machiz. To understand their relationship and the Artists Theatre, "it's important to understand that Myers believed that Machiz was a genius." In Hartigan's opinion, this resulted in Myers pushing Machiz far beyond his abilities.⁴⁷

Despite their problems with Machiz, most of the poets found it gratifying to have their plays produced and they respected Myers for being a risk-taker. As Abel points out, nothing about the Artists Theatre was a "sure thing." The plays were certainly not typical theatre fare and the poets,

in addition to having little or no theatre experience, also had no reputation. "Ashbery was unknown. James Merrill was unknown. Frank O'Hara was unknown. They knew me slightly as a writer of essays but I didn't have any big reputation."⁴⁸ A less adventurous soul than John Myers might have run one or two of the plays but would never have built a season, let alone a theatre, around them.

As Kenneth Koch observes, what Myers attempted was so unusual that few producers have attempted to duplicate his effort. "A few people have done it since but with little profit financially and very little capable criticism."⁴⁹ Although he has written many plays since, Koch is the first to admit that they are not intended for nor produced in mainstream theatres.

Because the "market" for poetic drama has always been so limited, some poets, such as John Ashbery, never felt encouraged to write many more plays. "I would probably have written some more plays if I had the sense at the time that anybody would ever be interested in performing them," says Ashbery. Even though his play, The Heroes was done by both the Living Theatre and the Artists Theatre, he remained skeptical about getting his work produced. From the perspective of a struggling, young poet, those first two productions seemed near flukes. When the Artists Theatre

did approach him about writing another play, he felt that the parameters they set up were too stringent. Owing to economic reasons, no doubt, Machiz asked that any play he write have few characters, few set changes and little scenery, "all the things that make theatre interesting."⁵⁰

Ashbery did go on to write several more plays. He speculates that he might have had another script produced by the Living Theatre. Nevertheless, there was always the risk of the play's never reaching the stage, of time and effort wasted. "It seemed like, even in the best of situations, it was a very problematic thing that one would pour a great deal of effort into the work without any certainty that it would ever see the light of day."⁵¹ Even to an unknown poet, it seemed easier to write poetry and attempt to get it published.

To this day, James Merrill prefers composing poetry to playwriting. Poems do not require productions in order to be complete or appreciated, nor do they require collaboration. And, although he loved seeing The Immortal Husband onstage (he went to see it over and over again), he has never since focussed his energies on the theatre.⁵²

Like the painters, most of the poets found that theatre, while exciting, was time-consuming and that it

distracted them from their primary vocation. They also found that there was a price to be paid for stepping out of isolation and into a collaborative environment. They lost their usual authority over their work and were forced to adapt their vision to that of the director, the actors and the scene designers.

Most did value the experience, however, and felt that the trade-off, at least temporarily, was worth it. They thrilled to see life breathed into their literary creations, to see their scenes acted out and to watch a live audience react to their work. Some, like John Ashbery, enjoyed the challenge of working in a new medium. Ashbery, for example, found playwriting to be stimulating because of both its similarities to and differences from poetry.

The theatre is not a suppressed passion of mine, something that I wish I'd gone into. Nevertheless, I have enjoyed writing plays, and I think this is because I tend to think in different voices. I think in my poetry one can become aware of a number of different voices carrying on a dialogue or conversation ... even though it's not indicated, of course, as it is in a play. This I think kind of naturally led me to attempt writing dialogue.⁵³

And, finally, all seemed to welcome the chance to join an artistic and avant-garde enterprise, particularly one that engaged so much of the Village community. In retrospect, the Artists Theatre seems almost like a natural outgrowth of the community, of its social and artistic

activity. As Barbara Guest says, it arose out of the Zeitgeist of the period.⁵⁴ The Artists Theatre was an unusual and ambitious project but it came out of an unusual and ambitious time, a time when, as Kenneth Koch observes, "For a moment, everything came together, things that later fell apart."⁵⁵

Notes to Chapter 2

¹Current Biography 1978, s.v. "Kenneth Koch."

²John Bernard Myers, The Poets of the New York School (Philadelphia: The Falcon Press, 1969), p. 9.

³Interview with John Ashbery, New York City, 10 February 1988.

⁴Interview with Barbara Guest, New York City, 4 March 1988.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Irving Sandler, The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 3.

⁷B. Guest.

⁸J. Ashbery.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹B. Guest.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵J. Ashbery.

¹⁶Interview with Alfred Leslie, New York City, 19 February 1988.

¹⁷B. Guest.

¹⁸John Bernard Myers, Tracking the Marvelous: A Life in the New York Art World (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 4.

¹⁹Interview with Robert Hivnor, New York City, 7 November 1987.

²⁰J. Ashbery.

²¹Interview with James Merrill, Telephone, 18 November 1987.

²²B. Guest.

²³Myers, Tracking, p. 4.

²⁴"Doing Tibor de Nagy," The Village Voice, 10 December 1979, p. 73.

²⁵J. Ashbery.

²⁶Interview with Kenneth Koch, New York City, 11 November 1987.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸K. Koch; J. Ashbery.

²⁹J. Ashbery.

³⁰B. Guest.

³¹Frank O'Hara, Selected Plays: Frank O'Hara (New York: Full Court Press, 1978), p. ix.

³²J. Merrill.

³³B. Guest.

³⁴J. Ashbery.

³⁵K. Koch.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷R. Hivnor.

³⁸B. Guest.

³⁹K. Koch; B. Guest.

⁴⁰Interview with James Schuyler, New York City, 22 December 1987.

⁴¹B. Guest.

⁴²J. Ashbery; K. Koch.

⁴³Herbert Machiz, "The Challenge of A Poetic Theatre." Theatre Arts 40 (February 1956): 89.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Interview with Lionel Abel, New York City, 11 December 1987.

⁴⁶B. Guest.

⁴⁷Interview with Grace Hartigan, New York City, 5 March 1988.

⁴⁸L. Abel.

⁴⁹K. Koch.

⁵⁰J. Ashbery.

⁵¹J. Ashbery.

⁵²J. Merrill.

⁵³Roger Oliver, "Interview: John Ashbery, Poet in the Theatre," Performing Arts Journal 3 (1979): 16.

⁵⁴B. Guest.

⁵⁵K. Koch.

"Literary heroes dramatize the moral texture of a country. Creations of the imagination, they embody the unspoken ideals, the undesired terrors, the dream life and the mundane existence of their readers," observes Theodore Gross in The Heroic Ideal in American Literature.¹ Carrying his analogy into the theatre, we find heroes onstage who embody the dreams, fears and preoccupations of their audience. Heroes who fit the mood and temperament of their time.

At least four plays of the Artists Theatre focus on a hero or heroes: three deal with ancient Greek and biblical heroes while one explores the curious life of a modern hero, a soldier returning from war. Working from the classical to the modern, I will compare and contrast the image of the hero in each of these four dramas in an effort to discover how each playwright has changed, expanded or maintained the traditional image of the hero. Who, for example, are these heroes? What are their strengths? their weaknesses? their fears? on what do they base their choices? What is the relationship of each with God? with man? To what extent are they modern heroes? American heroes? anti-heroes?

Although founded on a belief in the ordinary man, America has always revered the extraordinary individual: the frontiersman, the soldier, the cowboy. As Norman Mailer has

pointed out in his essay, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," we are a country that has "grown by the leap of one hero past another."² Every village and county has its statues, its plaques, its local heroes. Even in the face of industrialization, mass communication, and other dehumanizing twentieth-century innovations, we have held fast to our mythic idols.

The heroic myth was particularly strong in the Forties as America fought to establish, and succeeded in, its military supremacy. One needed to look no further than the departing and returning soldiers to find America's heroes. In the Fifties, however, the myth began slipping "underground," for although historians have painted the decade as a dull age of conformity and self-congratulation, it was for many a period of paranoia and confusion. Americans found themselves confronting the Cold War, Korea, Joe McCarthy, the building of the H-bomb and the possibility of World War III. We needed a hero but were confused about where to find one, for the paradoxes of the period were dizzying:

It was an age of American military dominance yet declining world influence, of peace sought through constant preparation for war, of widespread faith in progress along with the constant fear of nuclear Armageddon, and of a new Red Scare in the face of a minor internal communist threat. . . . And it was a time when the major peacemaker in Washington was not one

of the civilian bureaucrats but Dwight D. Eisenhower, the old general who had devoted his career to war."⁵

Although the war had ended five years before, it dominated the American consciousness and popular culture in 1950 and on through much of the decade. Americans continued to see war movies, read war novels, watch war plays. The 1950 New York Times printed daily installments of Churchill's The Second World War on its front pages. The images of American heroes were growing increasingly fuzzy with time but they resisted retirement.

Into this paradoxical world of postwar malaise and comfort, paranoia and security came the heroes of the plays of the Artists Theatre. John Ashbery's play, The Heroes, resurrects ancient Greek heroes, recasting them in a more modern mold. The survivors and victims of the Trojan War, as well as a handful of other famous mythic figures, are reunited for a weekend of frenzied socializing. Together they try to find meaning, or at least amusement, in their present lives. Frank O'Hara's Try! Try! deals with a war veteran returning home to confront his unfaithful wife and her lover. O'Hara subverts our traditional sympathy for the returning soldier by making the wife the focus of our attention and casting the hero in a less than sympathetic light. Lionel Abel's plays, The Death of Odysseus and Absalom, reinvent two heroes of antiquity, one from Greek

myth and one from the Bible. Although these heroes are modernized in speech and outlook, both are faced with the more classic dilemma of coming to terms with their past and with their destiny.

Abel has stated that The Death of Odysseus was the result of an ambitious plan that he came up with in the Fifties. "My idea was not to write my own plays but those of other playwrights which had been lost to the world through accident."⁴ The Death of Odysseus was based on a lost play by Sophocles from which there remains only one line of dialogue and some references by other writers. Abel's aim was not to "update" the play, i.e write it as Sophocles might have written it in the Fifties, but rather to create the play that the ancient playwright envisioned. Although he abandoned this plan after The Death of Odysseus, Abel returned to ancient myth in Absalom, the story of the struggle of David's eldest son for the throne.

Because, perhaps, of his interest in classical theatre and myth, both The Death of Odysseus and Absalom are more conventional in structure and style than most of the other Artists Theatre plays. Each has a strong narrative line, events unfold logically and chronologically. In addition, although both plays are based on myth, Abel dramatizes only the naturalistic elements of the stories. No supernatural

characters appear onstage, and no interaction between the natural and supernatural is ever heard or seen. For example, at one point, Absalom claims that God has spoken to him. This conversation, however, is not enacted.

Abel's dialogue is also "realistic" in the conventional theatre sense, i.e. it mirrors that of the audience. He uses prose rather than verse (a logical choice when we consider that Abel, unlike many of the other Artists Theatre playwrights, was known as an essayist rather than poet). By using the vernacular, the playwright makes the play as accessible to today's audiences as Sophocles' drama was to the Greeks.

Abel has been called a dedicated Francophile by Robert Hivnor for his taste in both philosophy and literature. Looking at The Death of Odysseus in particular, one is reminded of the economy and tight focus of Racinian drama. For example, Odysseus adheres to the neoclassical unities. There is one plot (Odysseus's struggle against death), one setting (the palace) and a limited time frame (the action takes place within a few hours). In addition, the central conflict is more internal than external: the main action is a decision that must be made by the central character (a man of high birth).

Although Absalom is less classically constructed than Odysseus, it too has few extraneous elements. Little distracts us from the main plot, Absalom's struggle against David (and God). The setting changes but not drastically (we move only from David's palace to the battleground) and we only hear about offstage events, rather than see them. Although the playwright may have made this decision for practical reasons (the difficulties of staging war and rape) his emphasis also helps to keep the focus tightly on the internal conflicts of the characters.

In both plays, as in Racine, the discussion of ideas seems to supersede the action. What the characters say is as, if not more, important than what they do. As an audience, therefore, we need to listen as well as watch to see what will happen. To a certain degree, the playwright keeps us focussed on the play's psychological drama and intellectual discussion by lowering the level of suspense. This is particularly true in Absalom where we often learn in advance not only what will happen but also how it will happen. In one of Abel's few departures from total realism, both Absalom and David's scribes have the power to foretell future events. In Odysseus, as well, the hero's fate is foretold, this time by the Oracle.

Although Abel's dramaturgy is essentially conventional, he does experiment to some degree with form and style. In addition to challenging the traditional notion of suspense as a necessary theatrical element, Abel also deliberately breaks the theatrical illusion by using devices such as asides and soliloquies. In The Death of Odysseus, for example, Abel opens the drama with a direct address from Odysseus to the audience. This opening aside serves as a prologue, giving the necessary exposition; it also familiarizes the audience with the central character. In fact, Herbert Machiz recalls directing the aside as a confidential chat between the actor and the audience. "It was imperative for Odysseus to win the audience's sympathy from the outset in order to maintain an interest in his problems throughout the play," notes Machiz, who wanted the audience to see Odysseus as more human than mythical.⁵

In this opening monologue, Odysseus explains to the audience that he expects to be the hero of the play, otherwise he would not be subjecting himself to public scrutiny. "Ladies and gentlemen, you may judge of my assurance by my willingness to be seen by you, and heard, and even overheard."⁶ Not only does Abel break the fourth wall but he uses the opportunity to make a humorous comment about the aside's historic lack of believability (is the

character heard or simply overheard?). In doing so, he further reminds the audience that what they are about to see is theatre not reality.

The play also concludes with a long monologue by Odysseus (thus giving it a balanced structure). Although the hero speaks not to the audience but to himself, the soliloquy ends the play on a highly theatrical note. It recalls the ancient tradition that Abel is trying to reinvent. In addition, it indicates that Abel, like many modern playwrights, is veering away from naturalism and realism toward theatricalism. Rather than drawing the audience into the theatrical illusion, Abel breaks the spell, thus preventing us from "believing" what is happening onstage or fully identifying with his central character. In doing so, he may also be helping us to concentrate on the ideas in the play for, according to Brecht, an audience that retains its objectivity tends to leave the theatre thinking as well as feeling.

Brecht also believed that narration would keep an audience from remaining immersed in the theatrical illusion. It may be partly for this reason that Abel inserts two characters, the scribes, into Absalom. These scribes, Abishai and his apprentice, Semei, do not narrate the entire play, but they do, at certain points, retell and foretell

the action. Although their narration is realistically motivated (they dictate to each other) and they are treated as regular characters in the play (others acknowledge and react to them), their constant presence onstage reminds us that a story is being told and that we, the audience, are witnessing a theatrical event.

The two scribes also provide a visual reminder of God's "presence" in the drama. As mentioned earlier, they have the supernatural ability to foresee the future. Seated onstage throughout the play, they record past and future events. At the palace as well as on the battlefield, they and their "book" offer a stage metaphor for the invisible higher being who decides the fates of David, Absalom and all men.

In The Hero With A Thousand Faces, Joseph Campbell develops the links between Greek, Biblical, Oriental and other myths in order to prove that there is, indeed, an archetypal hero who, with slight variations, belongs to all cultures. He observes that all heroes, whether they be Greek, Oriental or Biblical, share similar characteristics and experiences. Every hero, for example, embarks on a journey. This journey may take him to supernatural regions to fight fantastic monsters. No matter how great a distance he travels, however, the hero's journey stands for a

spiritual search. "The passage of the mythological hero may be overground, incidentally; fundamentally it is inward."⁷

This description fits the heroes of Abel's two plays. In each, the deed that the legendary hero must perform is really a decision that requires a journey "inward" and a period of self-examination.

Thus, the hero's quest is ultimately more spiritual than physical. Through it, he learns something new about himself and, according to Campbell, about his relationship to the gods. The perilous journey turns out to be:

. . . a labor not of attainment but of reattainment, not discovery but rediscovery. The godly powers sought and dangerously won are revealed to have been within the heart of the hero all the time. He is "the king's son" who has come to know who he is and therewith has entered into the exercise of his proper power -- "God's son,"⁸ who has learned to know how much that title means.

Campbell's theory aptly describes the "journey" made by King David in Absalom, Abel's reinvention of the Biblical myth. Through his struggle with his eldest son, David rediscovers the greatness and terrible burden of being God's chosen.

The overt conflict in the play is Absalom's struggle to be King David's successor.⁹ Absalom, although the eldest of David's sons, faces two obstacles to the throne. At the outset of the play, however, he is aware of only one: his murder of his older brother, Amnon. Absalom killed Amnon in

order to avenge the latter's rape of Tamar, their sister. Although Absalom has never been punished by the King, he has never been publicly forgiven. To survive, Absalom needs to be king, as David repeatedly observes, "one son needs the crown, needs it for his very life."¹⁰

David cannot choose Absalom, however, because of a prior pact that he had made with God. This is the second obstacle, the one of which Absalom is initially ignorant. This pact insures that David's youngest son, Solomon, will succeed him. The promise was made in payment for David's greatest sin against God, whom he angered by committing adultery. David impregnated Bathsheba, wife of Uriah, then sent her husband into battle to die. God punished David by killing the first child of David and Bathsheba. David then promised God that, if He would allow Bathsheba to bear a second child, that child would inherit the throne.

If only the first obstacle, the murder of Amnon, stood in Absalom's way, then the play would turn upon a father/son struggle. With the introduction of the covenant with God, however, the conflict takes on more celestial dimensions. God becomes the major antagonist in the play and the struggle becomes one of the hero (or heroes) with a supernatural being. At the beginning of the play, we see David resisting God. Four empty chairs (for David's four

sons) stand beside David's throne but he postpones making a decision, hoping that he will die before he can crown Solomon. (Absalom can then seize the throne.) By procrastinating, he hopes to circumvent God's will.¹¹

David is an archetypal mythic hero in that his "journey" carries significance for an entire people. David not only rules Israel but God has promised him an eternal dynasty.¹² With each journey David makes and each test he passes, he strengthens his link with God and further insures the well-being of his people.

Thus, David's promise, while personally difficult, is one that must be kept if he is to benefit rather than further jeopardize his people. He has already thrown the nation into disarray by refusing to punish either Absalom or Amnon. By allowing incest and fratricide to go unpunished, he has threatened the moral, social and political fabric of his entire nation.¹³ To deny them the king that God has chosen for them would be to compound his previous errors.

The inevitability of David's decision is underscored by the presence of the two scribes. They are, in a sense, the gatekeepers of destiny, representatives of God's will on earth. When David rebels against them, claiming "My will is in me, not in that book of yours," Abishai reminds him:

"Sire, your acts are destined. And whatever is destined must happen at a certain time. Only what does not matter may be done when you want to do it."¹⁴

The scribes know that, just as David's submission to God's will is inevitable, so are Absalom's rebellion and eventual defeat. Thus, they refuse to help Absalom when he tries to enlist their aid, asking them to write in a fabricated dialogue that he claims to have had with God. They recognize that his fate too is predestined.

Not only in the play but in the Bible, we see Absalom as a victim of God's greater plan. He uses Absalom as a tool of vengeance against David. In retaliation for the king's clandestine affair with Bathsheba, God promises that David will be publicly humiliated; his harem will be invaded in front of all Israel.¹⁵ Absalom unknowingly carries out this curse, operating on the advice of his counselor, Achitofel, whose generally wise judgment has been thwarted by God.¹⁶ A similar action occurs in the play. Absalom does not enter his father's harem, but he does violate Tamar, his sister.

In both sources, Absalom acts on the advice of Achitofel who, despite being the grandfather of Solomon, supports Absalom's bid for the throne. In the play,

however, God's hand is not visible. Achitofel's wisdom is not obscured by supernatural forces; he knowingly gives bad advice to Absalom out of anger. In Abel's version, therefore, human beings must take a greater responsibility for the turn of events.

In the play, Achitofel convinces Absalom that, by raping Tamar, he will win God's favor. He points out that Absalom, up until this point, has been counting on the "goodness of his case," on the fact that he is the eldest son and that his murder of Amnon was justified. According to Achitofel, Absalom must ruin his case in order to find favor with God. "God does not like the man who counts on the goodness of his case. For, if a man's case is good, he will count on that and not on God. God likes the man who counts on Him."¹⁷ Although he knows that Achitofel gives this counsel maliciously, his logic appeals to Absalom, who increasingly realizes that his adversary is not David but God.

Once Absalom recognizes that a power greater than David stands in his way, he begins to struggle against his destiny. Although David warns him that "You cannot choose to be chosen," Absalom persists, determined not to be "wasted" by God. Although the biblical Absalom never gains God's favor, Abel's Absalom ultimately does obtain a partial

victory. Through sheer persistence, he forces God to give him a purpose. As Absalom explains to David, "God never intended me to have the role he has now given me and which I wrested from him by the sheer force of my desire to have it."¹⁸

God allows the rebellious Absalom to foresee his own death. In doing so, Absalom becomes David's "taskmaster" for he also foresees David's future. He learns that David is soon to lose all illusion of free will. With Absalom's death, David will be forced to recognize the fullness of God's control over him. He will be stripped of all the feelings that he had as a father, a lover, a human being. Only his greatness will remain in all its inhuman harshness. "Nothing of you will remain to obscure, delay or soften the extreme designs of God. You will be His plaything. His puppet even." David will not even be human enough to mourn his own son's death. His famous Biblical lamentation will, out of necessity, be a fabrication of his scribes, for God will not allow this unflattering portrait of David to be recorded. As Absalom explains to David, "My chosenness cannot be noted in the book of these events. It belongs to me alone. It does not mean that I will win over you in the field of battle but it does mean, . . . , that I am the hero of this story."¹⁹

If what Absalom claims is true, that he is indeed the hero of the story, where does that leave David, the chosen of God? Helpless in the grip of greatness, his chosenness seems as much a burden as it is a blessing. In exchange for being God's favorite, he is forced to forfeit free will. Finding himself incapable of lamentation, David cries out, first in anger then in submission:

I do not want your help, God. I need help against God .
 . . . There is no defeating you, God. I fight and I
 fail. I strive toward the bitter. I yield to the sweet.
 All is made sweet by God.²⁰

With Absalom's death, David becomes reconciled with God. As Campbell points out, this discovery of the divinity within is the desired outcome of the archetypal hero's journey. Nevertheless, David's fate is not without ambiguity. He pays such a high price for his greatness that Absalom, in contrast, seems to be as much, if not more, of a hero.

Unlike David, Absalom boldly wrestles with his fate. Against all odds, he fights to be king. Failing that, he manages, through sheer persistence, to force God to make concessions, to not "waste" him. Absalom's determination to shape his destiny is not unlike that of the existential heroes of Sartre, who greatly influenced Abel. Although Sartre's heroes operate without the illusion of a higher

authority, they share Absalom's willingness to take responsibility for their fate. They believe that it is in their power to make decisions that will shape their destiny and their identity. As long as man lives, he has the responsibility and capability to change who he is and the world in which he lives.

We see Sartre's influence again in The Death of Odysseus. Odysseus too tries to wrest a second chance from the gods. Although he fails, he does demonstrate that it is possible and often crucial for man to challenge and change his own identity. As The Death of Odysseus begins, we again see a hero, a favorite of the gods, nearing the end of his life, his "journey." Like David, Odysseus has unfinished business with man and with God. He too must pay the consequences of a past indiscretion: during his Odyssey, the Greek hero had an adulterous affair with Circe. She bore him a son, Telegonus, whom he has never seen. That son has now invaded the kingdom of Odysseus, intent on avenging his birth by killing Odysseus.

When the play opens, Odysseus does not know who is invading his kingdom or why. His first clue comes from a enemy deserter, who has left his post because he dreamt that he would kill or be killed by a member of his own family. Odysseus wants to send the deserter back to his unit but the

latter refuses to go, preferring to face execution rather than the possibility of spilling family blood.

His second clue comes from Penelope who, against his wishes, has gone to the Oracle for the outcome of the invasion. Odysseus at first resists hearing the prophecy, for he sees the Oracles as contemptuous prophets with no regard for human suffering. "When have the Oracles spoken clearly? We ask them in anguish. They answer us ambiguously." Odysseus resents the interference of the Oracles and perhaps even that of the gods. Having successfully survived an exceedingly hazardous life, he (like Sartre's heroes) wants to believe only in himself. "I know who I am. I am Odysseus. I do not want to be informed about the future by the Oracle. I shall know the future when I myself create it."²¹

Eventually, however, Telemachus, his son by Penelope, convinces him to listen to the prophecy which states that Odysseus is "to die, this day, at the hands of your own son."²² As expected, the wording is ambiguous, leading Odysseus to turn momentarily turn against Telemachus. Eventually, though, he figures out that his enemy is Telegonus, the son of Circe.

As in Absalom, the conflict at first appears to be a generational struggle between father and son. Soon, however, we recognize that the conflict pits Odysseus against a higher force, against fate. Like David, his journey will ultimately require strict self-examination: a reassessment of himself and his relationship to the gods.

Initially, Odysseus tries to outwit the gods, to circumvent the prophecy made against him. Just as Oedipus's mother sent him away in order to avoid the fulfillment of prophesy, just as David tries to outsmart God by postponing his decision, Odysseus attempts to think of a way to thwart fate.

If anyone can defeat the gods, it should be Odysseus. His craftiness is legendary, his talent for survival proved over and over again during the Odyssey. In his opening soliloquy, he assures us that, although he may be weary, he has not lost his uncanny ability to escape even the most treacherous traps. "The great thing, the capital thing, I have discovered is this: one has to be in favor of the predicament one happens to be in. Who can do that? Odysseus."²³ Odysseus has always known how to turn a situation to his advantage; he has also survived because he has always made survival his number one priority.²⁴ As his Captain points out, "Everybody knows that while the other

Greek leaders were bent on saving reputation, you, Odysseus, also had a view to saving your own life." ²⁵

Although Odysseus' survivalist philosophy has always saved him, now, in his old age, it has come back to haunt him. His army is in chaos for his soldiers no longer believe in the honor of dying in battle. Odysseus's example has convinced them that for a soldier "to be killed in battle is to show lack of intelligence." ²⁶ Thus, they break training, fake illness and suffer self-inflicted wounds, rather than face battle. Like David's, Odysseus' private behavior is beginning to have public reverberations.

The soldiers, for example, do not hesitate to accede to Telegonus's demand for a one-on-one fight with Odysseus. Their disloyalty hurts Odysseus but he decides there is yet another way to circumvent the Oracle's prophecy. Telemachus will fight in his place. "The Oracle shall be proved wrong," Odysseus asserts. "My son shall save me from my son."²⁷

His plan is soon proved to be flawed. First, Penelope points out to Odysseus that the gods will not stop at sacrificing Telemachus to get to him. Second, Odysseus sabotages his own scheme when he admits to Penelope that he may not give himself up even if Telemachus dies. Penelope becomes enraged at the idea of Odysseus' use of Telemachus

to "buy time" and urges Telemachus not to fight. "Odysseus has never placed his whole trust in one other person; just as he never placed all his love in one woman or his hope of continuance in one son."²⁸

Despite Penelope's harsh words, Odysseus is unrepentant. As he explains to Telemachus, "This would not be the first time I broke my word and lived to forgive myself for doing so." The king sees nothing wrong with not upholding his end of the bargain. As far as he is concerned, in the event of Telemachus's defeat, his would be the only logical position to take. "Only a fool goes to certain death. When you risk your life, you possess it all the more powerfully; but when you surrender it without a struggle, you are more dead than dead."²⁹

Telemachus leaves for battle but on such a discouraged and threatening note that Odysseus calls him back. The latter decides to fight Telegonus himself rather than risk having Telemachus throw his life away out of anger.

If you had flung your life away, and just to spite me, I might have given way to some slight inclination to die, too. That is a feeling I do not wish to have, one I abhor as much as I do death itself . . . Always I sacrificed to life."³⁰

To date, Odysseus has never feared anything more than death or than wanting to die. That is why his prisoner, the

deserter, so amazes him. The man prefers to face certain execution rather than risk spilling family blood.

"Captain," Odysseus observes, "that man is not afraid of dying. Which means, all men being cowards, that he must be much more afraid of something else."³¹ Until recently, Odysseus has never questioned his own philosophy or priorities. Now, however, he begins to wonder if there may not be something worse than death, something worthy of his prisoner's fears.

In myth, the killing of one's own family is never without dire consequences. Witness Clytemnestra and then Orestes, haunted by the Furies. In the Bible, too, the killing of one's family is not generally condoned. The story of Absalom and Amnon is really a replay of Cain and Abel. Although Absalom (a later version of Cain) has a legitimate motive, his deed will not go unpunished. In Abel's play, once Absalom has raped Tamar, the horror of his previous crime assaults him. "I am the murderer of my brother! His blood covers me!" he cries.³² Faced with the possibility of killing his own son, Odysseus begins to understand what it is that the deserter fears, that there is something more terrible than death.

The deserter's dream foreshadows Odysseus's own dilemma. Is it better to be killed or to kill one's flesh

and blood? Odysseus is suddenly forced to re-examine his priorities. For the first time, he is not sure if "sacrificing to life" is the proper course. When Penelope asks him if he will let his son Telegonus live ("When the moment comes to strike--or yourself be hit--shall you wish him length of days?"), Odysseus is, for once, not ready with an answer.³³

The confrontation brings him to a new awareness of his limitations. In the play's closing monologue, Odysseus addresses his empty throne as though it were his former self.³⁴ As he speaks, we overhear the thought process that has brought him to his decision: "A judgment on your life, on your whole life, Odysseus, whose insufficiency is now laid bare. You are not serious enough, not simple enough, not severe enough, and not spiritual enough -- no, not to kill your son."³⁵

Although there is no one that Odysseus loves more than himself, he knows he must surrender. He must detour from his usual course of action in order to avoid violating a higher law. Once he has made his decision, however, Odysseus feels severed from his former self. Although he has wanted to believe in the force and endurance of his identity, ultimately Odysseus recognizes that he must let go of who he was. "I shall have to separate from you, Odysseus," he tells

himself. "I do not need your qualities."³⁶ His wit and craftiness are now of no more avail to him than his legendary bow, which he is no longer able to string.

Although Odysseus mourns the loss of his former self ("When I march from these halls, I must be more dead than are the dead"), he recognizes his own capability to change, to reshape his identity.³⁷ Faced with a situation in which the old Odysseus is useless, he makes a decision to carve out a new, more appropriate identity. Unlike Sartre's heroes, however, Odysseus acknowledges (albeit reluctantly) a higher authority that guides his destiny. Thus, this hero must work within stricter parameters: he can transform himself but cannot subvert his fate.

In both Absalom and The Death of Odysseus, Abel seriously explores the issue of heroism. He examines the dilemma of living, and dying, heroically. His characters, while tormented, never lose their dignity. John Ashbery's heroes, on the other hand, are cartoonlike characters, whose flaws and eccentricities comically outweigh their heroic reputations.

In The Heroes, Ashbery satirizes both the sacred cows of Greek myth and the theatre that enshrined them. He reinvents famous mythic heroes such as Achilles and Theseus,

turning them into modern men with modern neuroses and preoccupations. He then tells their stories in a way that spoofs theatrical conventions and the Greek stage in particular.

Unlike Abel's plays, which are about mythic heroes but written in a realistic style, Ashbery's play is intentionally illogical and non-realistic. In fact, both The Heroes and Frank O'Hara's Try! Try! resemble the drama being written in the late forties and early fifties by experimental European playwrights such as Eugene Ionesco and Boris Vian, both of whom influenced the later American Theatre of the Absurd. And, although neither The Heroes nor O'Hara's Try! Try! is mentioned in Martin Esslin's study of The Theatre of the Absurd, both plays do, in many ways, correspond to Esslin's definition of absurdist drama.

As Esslin explains, the Theatre of the Absurd is often concerned with "literature of dream and fantasy" and with myth.³⁸ The Heroes deals with both and is based on a fantastic premise: a mini-reunion of Trojan and Greek heroes at the "country house" of Achilles. There the slayers and the slain, enemies and friends, come together to socialize and reminisce.

The gathering is, at best, an improbable one. One of their guests, Hector, the King of Troy, was brutally killed by Achilles in the Trojan War. Another, Andromache, Hector's widow, spent most of her life in captivity after watching her husband and her son, Astyanx (another guest), slaughtered by her hosts.

Achilles has not limited the guest list to lifelong enemies, however. His Greek friends include Ulysses (also known as Odysseus) and Theseus. He has also invited two goddesses: Ulysses' ex-lover, the sorceress Circe and Hebe, the Goddess of Youth. Achilles' co-host is his "significant other," Patroclus, who also fought and died in the Trojan War.

Like many absurdist plays (and farces), The Heroes is satirical. Although Ashbery, like Abel, chooses to examine the heroes at the end of their lives, he portrays them in a far less favorable light. Ashbery's aging heroes seem more like over-the-hill Hollywood stars than admirable adventurers (Circe even looks like Theda Bara).³⁹ They worry about getting old and losing their sex appeal; they whine about the monotony of life-after-adventure. Like Mel Brooks's "2,000 Year Old Man," they are ancient senior citizens who have not necessarily grown wiser with age.

Ashbery also flouts traditional dramatic structure. His exposition, for instance, is deliberately ambiguous. When the play opens, we are not sure exactly why, when or where the guests are gathering. The action takes place in a livingroom of an indeterminable period, in a country house by the sea.⁴⁰ Ashbery calls for costumes that are vaguely Greek, and designer Nell Blaine recalls dressing the stage with "gold, pseudo-Greek" chairs, but the play cannot take place in real time or space since most of its characters are mythical, dead or both.⁴¹

In addition to its vague setting and exposition, The Heroes has no clear, narrative line. Although Theseus is the most talked about character, his actions do not provide a spine for the play. The drama is more like a series of vignettes (almost like vaudeville): short scenes involving different combinations of characters.

Like many absurdist or surrealistic plays, The Heroes also incorporates elements of farce. The play has a profusion of exits and entrances, the characters come and go from all directions. In addition, they are constantly in crisis. Theseus wants attention, Patroclus wants Theseus, Circe wants Ulysses, Ulysses wants "out." These unresolved crises continually overlap, adding to the play's frenetic pace and circuslike atmosphere. Changes in time and setting

are equally abrupt. The stage suddenly darkens for no logical reason. The passage of time, and even a switch from reality to fantasy, is indicated by a quick flicker of the lights.

The action of the play is equally unpredictable. Anything can and does happen. As the Chorus announces midway through The Heroes, "So far this play has been easy. From now on it's going to be more difficult to follow."⁴² A wild sequence of events follows the Chorus's warning including a tryst between Circe and Theseus and "The Dream of Theseus," a distorted, two-minute history of the Trojan War. "The Dream" is a play within the play which supposedly takes place in Theseus' unconscious.

Ashbery switches to this inner drama almost without warning. Alone onstage, Theseus falls to his knees, then to the floor, unconscious. The stage picture then undergoes an instantaneous change: the lights go down and Achilles' livingroom turns into the Trojan plains. The sea is visible. Martial music is playing. The Chorus then announces to the audience: "Now we have The Dream of Theseus."⁴³

As the Chorus's direct announcement to the audience indicates, The Heroes (like much absurdist theatre) is

deliberately theatrical. Ashbery continually breaks the illusion, thus preventing the audience from forgetting that it is in a theatre. This allows him to spoof both modern and ancient theatrical conventions. During the dream sequence, for example, Patroclus and a Trojan Guard exchange the following anachronistic comments:

GUARD: What's the password?

PATROCLUS: The Cherry Orchard.

GUARD: You're taking advantage⁴⁴ of the fact that this play is laid in ancient times.

Ashbery also satirizes the Chorus by characterizing it as a slightly bored, middle-aged woman in a navy blue dress, who describes her perspective (and that of all choruses) in one succinct sentence: "I have seen many people in every possible relation to each other and I have never seen any good come of it."⁴⁵ Blaine carried Ashbery's satirical tone over into her design, using a "cartoonish pull toy" to represent the Trojan Horse.⁴⁶

As is typical of both farce and absurdist drama, The Heroes utilizes not only verbal humor but physical comedy and spectacle. At the end of the dream sequence, for instance, an immense explosion inside the walls of Troy fills the sky with light. The Chorus then runs on stage, pretending to be Cassandra, triumphantly crying "whatever I say, goes."⁴⁷ The setting then switches abruptly back to

Achilles' livingroom where a wild party is going on. The heroes are dancing with the gods, the chorus and each other. At one point, Theseus rejects Patroclus who falls to a couch, sobbing. Seconds later, a policeman enters and we learn that Patroclus has died.

None of the heroes seem saddened or startled by his sudden, mysterious death except Achilles. In an obvious spoof of Achilles's mythic mourning for Patroclus (after the latter's death in the Trojan war), the hero talks to the corpse as though it were still alive. "My poor baby. . . . Come, Skippy. Ton papa is going to take you up that nice walk he never told you about."⁴⁸

As in most farces, death is not tragic. "Characters die and spring back to life. Or their deaths are bandied about farcically, " as Albert Bermel points out.⁴⁹ Although Achilles' houseguests assume that he has gone off to commit suicide, no one tries to stop him.

THESEUS: Where's Achilles?

CHORUS: He's gone out, probably to do away with himself.

THESEUS: Then you'll say goodbye to him for me.⁵⁰

The play does not conclude with any clear sense of resolution or harmony. If anything, there is a sense of dissolution at the end of The Heroes, of things falling apart. While the policeman investigates Patroclus's murder,

Theseus and the other characters pack their bags. Nothing can be settled because nothing of consequence seems to have been learned or done by the characters. They are the same self-centered, whining group of over-the-hill stars that they were when they arrived. When life gets boring or complicated, they pick up their toys and go home.

Because the play is satirical, Ashbery's characters are funny rather than sympathetic. His heroes are caricatured rather than realistically drawn, their flaws and idiosyncrasies exaggerated or invented. For instance, Ashbery makes Patroclus and Achilles seem particularly ridiculous. They are no longer discreet homosexual lovers (as implied in The Iliad) but a jealous, flamboyant couple, who bicker as though they were married.

Ashbery also satirizes the great Greek hero, Theseus. A self-centered bore, Theseus finds it impossible to be interested in anyone but himself. In fact, he sounds like someone who has spent far too long on the analyst's couch contemplating his own brilliance. Although he makes light of his adventures (he characterizes the Minotaur as "a stupid, unambitious piece of stage machinery"), he expects everyone to listen to his theories on art and life. These theories, however, turn out to be a nonsensical jumble of flowery, philosophical half-truths. For example, Theseus

claims that slaying the Minotaur did not take great courage but rather "the indifference of a true aesthete." Later (in another of the play's humorous anachronistic passages), he describes Daedalus' labyrinth as though it were a New York subway station. "Old posters peeling off the walls, a smell of urine, the wind sighing through the cracks in the planks." One viewing the labyrinth, is, therefore, in the position of "a person who believes that dada is still alive."⁵¹

While Theseus seems to have had too much therapy (or too much art), Ulysses appears to be terminally melancholy. He arrives dressed in tweeds and extremely reluctant to socialize. Even Circe, his old flame, cannot get him excited. To him, the reunion is a morbid, meaningless affair because there is nothing significant that two mythic figures can possibly say to each other.

That's the strangest time. . . . When two ancient personages meet. Known to everybody in the world, disfigured by trash of folklore, excrement of centuries. Two gigantic pieces of⁵² rubbish, poking through the twilight of the world.

Ashbery's unconventional portraits serve not only to satirize but to humanize the ancient figures. He portrays them as modern, neurotic individuals rather than the larger-than-life symbols that we usually confront in myth and in the theatre. He questions their sexual

preferences, their sanity and their social skills. And, it turns out, the weekend retreat brings out the worst in all of them, for it calls for a kind of social heroics with which they are unfamiliar. As Circe says to Achilles: "I think you're the real hero of this occasion. Providing all these activities for us so we don't get bored or sleepy."⁵³

Social heroics also come into play in Frank O'Hara's Try! Try! which deals with an awkward "romantic" triangle. Although less comical than the Ashbery's play, O'Hara's tone is bitterly satirical. Like The Heroes, Try! Try! might be labeled a spoof. In this case, however, the material being satirized is not ancient but popular myth, the stuff of movies and novels. The play deals with a classic situation, a veteran's homecoming, but in an unconventional way. In Try! Try!, Jack, a soldier, returns from the war to find his unfaithful wife unrepentant and unapologetic. There is no "hero's welcome" for Jack. Rather, it is the lover John, the man who did not fight, who gets the spoils of the war.

The play involves three characters: Violet, the wife, Jack, the soldier (who, for our purposes, is the "hero") and John, the "other man." Although the names of the characters coincide with the names of the original cast for the play, they seem significant for other reasons. Jack is, of course, an often used nickname for John, implying the lover

and husband are connected. They seem to be rivals but are they doubles for each other? Are they two sides of the same man? The lover is, after all, not much luckier than Jack. He wins Violet but seems to mean very little to her. He is a "John" or trick, "the best lay within these four walls," according to Violet. Violet sticks with him only because she "cares enough to hurt" him, while she is indifferent to her husband, who has been away too long.⁵⁴ Also, the play deliberately spoofs a "Dear John" plot, i.e. the letter that Violet should have written to her husband, Jack, before he came home.

Like Ashbery, O'Hara flouts theatre conventions. Try! Try!, like many later absurdist plays, is built less upon the traditional structure of exposition, conflict, resolution than around an associative structure that follows the inner reality of the characters. Although there is a central conflict (whom will Violet choose?), we focus more on the significance of what the characters are saying and thinking than on what will happen.

Try! Try! fits Esslin's definition of absurdist drama in that it belongs to a "theatre of situation as against a theatre of events in sequence, and . . . uses a language based on patterns of concrete images versus argument."⁵⁵ The play progresses less through dramatic action than

through a series of images created by the dialogue and the stage picture. These visual and verbal images are piled one atop the other, creating an increasingly complex and confused world onstage.

The play opens and closes, for example, with the same image: a "romantic" triangle in which two men want the same woman. As the play progresses, this image grows more complicated and disturbing. Who loves whom? Who hurt whom? Who deserves whom? Who is punishing whom? Throughout the play, these issues intensify but are never resolved. The play ends as it began (with the veteran, Jack, as the outsider) but with none of the above questions clearly answered. The ending is neither happy nor sad; it is simply "what happens next."

O'Hara's ambiguity seems deliberate. Like other absurdist and surrealist playwrights, he is less interested in telling a story than creating a dramatic situation with multiple layers of meaning.

O'Hara adds to the ambiguity and imagery of the play by using only verse. The characters never speak in prose, only in poetry. Layers of meaning are compressed into a few lines. In addition, much of the poetry is nonsensical, and filled with inversions and bizarre twists. John's opening

lines, for example, set up the contradictory, illogical and disturbing world of the play:

"I like songs about hat-check girls,
elevators, bunions, syphilis, all the
old sentimental things. It's not enough
to be thoughtful, is it?"⁵⁶

Although the poetry, rather than the dramatic action, is the heart of O'Hara's play, there is, to a certain degree, the same kind of "devaluation of language" that Esslin describes in The Theatre of the Absurd, in that "what happens on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the words spoken by the characters."⁵⁷ Throughout the play, for example, Violet and her lover make vicious verbal attacks on one another. Nevertheless, Violet ends up choosing John over her husband, Jack. And, at the end of the play, although Violet tells John, "I wish you'd / go away and stay away," she then throws herself into his arms and cries.⁵⁸

Throughout Try! Try!, language tends not clarify but to confuse. Even when the characters try to communicate, they fail. As a result, they remain isolated from one another, indifferent to one another's needs. When Jack tries to tell Violet and John about his war experiences, for example, they virtually ignore him. John responds to Jack's outpouring by excusing himself to go to the bathroom, while

Violet is similarly noncommittal and sarcastic, "Just go on with the news bulletin. We're all terribly interested in the outside world here." Part of their indifference stems from a reluctance to deal with Jack's confusion but part of it is simply habit. They tune Jack out just as they tune out the daily barrage of information and images that comes their way via television and mass media. They do not listen to it or to Jack because none of it can penetrate their isolation. They remain, as Violet puts it, "Stranded on this planet of incessant / communication like gophers in their sweet-nosed / paralysis."⁵⁹

The characters of Try! Try! talk but do not communicate (a common theme in absurdist drama but one that goes back beyond Chekhov to Molière and Shakespeare). They respond to each other with nonsense ("Never mind the rabbits and the tears," says Violet to Jack), non-sequiturs, and twisted clichés.⁶⁰ Violet's first words to her husband, for example, seem to be a nonsensical parody of a melodramatic stage reunion:

Oh Jack! My Jackson!
 Why did you leave me?
 Since you left I've had
 to sell the flute and
 the bathtub.⁶¹

Later, Violet responds to Jack's questions about her lover with the following non-sequitur:

Children wade on the receding shingle
gaunt in their practiced grace. Mature
they ape their elders and cavort like
pogo sticks in the advancing foam.⁶²

Part of the reason that characters do not appear to respond rationally to each other is that much of the dialogue is stream-of-consciousness. At the end of the play, for example, Violet describes her fantasies to Jack and John:

I would like to fill a jungle
with elephants and gorillas and
boa constrictors. I would like
to fill the trees and waterfalls
with the blackness in me, so I⁶³
might be a bird of paradise.

Passages such as this reveal to us the garish inner workings of the characters' minds. In addition, they show us how isolated and self-absorbed the characters are. In a sense, Try! Try! focuses (as do many later plays of the Theatre of the Absurd) on "man forever lonely, immersed within the prison of his subjectivity."⁶⁴ Having rejected the idea of an objective reality, modern man has nothing to fall back on but his own internal reality.

Part of that subjective reality is his dream life. In Try! Try!, as in many surrealist and absurdist dramas, the line between conscious and unconscious reality is not clearcut. There is less of a line between dreaming and

waking. As Jack explains to Violet in his letter, "I keep / on dreaming of you whether awake or asleep."⁶⁵

The characters also operate in a world that seems other than real. O'Hara is deliberately vague about the time ("A war has ended") and the location for the play ("A room").⁶⁶ We don't know how long Jack has been away or how long the affair has been going on. Violet and John often act and speak like characters in a melodrama:

JOHN: My own!

VIOLET: Dearest of all forgotten ones!⁶⁷

Their physical actions are also exaggerated to the point where the two seem like a circus or vaudeville act. Angry at John, Violet dives for him. He grabs and pinions her. "You want to toss me for who'll beat up whom?" he asks.⁶⁸ The couple also undergoes violent mood swings. One moment, they fight. The next, they fall into bed. Even John comments on the fleeting, unpredictable, nature of their "affection":

Just think! twice in one day. Our infatutuation is rearriving. What trouble it will arrange to stir up in the next ten minutes between two oh-so-troubled-and-disenchanted hearts!⁶⁹

Violet's responses to her husband, Jack, are equally unexpected and illogical. She saves his letters and longs for his return but when he does appear, she ignores him.

She seems both to love and hate him, to want both to protect and hurt him. As in absurdist drama, the characters are not governed by conventional rules of conduct or motivation nor are their actions dictated by probability or logic.

As in The Heroes, the unexpectedness of the characters' comments and actions, the shocks and surprises, rather than suspense, are what keep the audience interested. O'Hara keeps us alert by continually subverting our expectations.

Jack, for example, turns out to be more of an anti-hero than a hero. Before he enters, there are hints that he may be somewhat effeminate. His letter to Violet makes him sound confused and weak. Upon hearing it, John makes fun of his flowery writing style, noting that it seems like "a pose." He also calls him a "male war bride."⁷⁰

When Jack arrives, he appears even less conventionally heroic. Seemingly oblivious to the fact that Violet and John are in their underwear (and have just had sex), Jack begins pouring out his confusion about the war moments after he walks in the door. While John and Violet sit there half-undressed, only half-listening, Jack launches into a long monologue about his experiences.

His observations are those of a disillusioned, frightened man rather than a war hero. Going into battle, he thought of himself as almost mythic. "Why, I thought of myself as / Eric's son, Lief, going towards / the moon with a world behind me / and a lot of blood to get off my / chest." His perspective changed, however, when he realized that he was not an unbeatable, conquering hero but just another power-hungry mortal: "anyone could/knock me down, all those others who wanted/everything as much as I did." From that time on, he spent his days in terror, wondering "when bullets, mortars, and / bombs were going to find out where / my courage ended and this cowardice -- " began. Even before a sniper wounded him, he was beaten, although he does not know by what. Greed, perhaps. "The land, / the sun, all bigger than the / gods intended me to own?"⁷¹

In Jack, O'Hara captures the dilemma of a modern soldier who cannot help but recognize the inherent contradictions of war and of soldier's duty: "I sat my mount prettily and hacked / babies and old women with a song / on my breast."⁷² He questions both his own motives and the motives of those who sent him into battle.

Although Jack feels compelled to explain to Violet and John what he has learned, neither seems to listen or care.

The war was not their reality, their battlefield was the homefront. They are separated from Jack by both time and experience. Together, the lovers form a wall that prevents Jack from reentering the world he left behind.

Thus, O'Hara's modern hero is a dispossessed man. He feels deserted, locked out. "It's / like coming onto the stage, sitting down at the / piano / and finding no orchestra there!"⁷³ After years of anguished separation from Violet, he comes home to find that she is no longer his. Thus, when John chides him for not sending a telegram announcing his arrival, Jack explodes:

Shock! I come home to find you both in your underwear in this place that looks like the landscape outside a bottle factory, and you ask me why I'm not more considerate of the woman who's been eating my brain out for years in the salt mines of the heart, its panic? That's where the wars rage,⁷⁴ you know. That's where all the despatches come from.

Jack is in his own personal hell. He wants Violet but cannot have her. He went away to fight only to find that the war has invaded his own home.

In classical myth, Penelope, the faithful wife, held down the fort while Odysseus traveled. In popular myth, the good woman puts a candle in the window and patiently waits for her hero to come home. In real life, however, things change, time passes. As Violet's lover explains to Jack,

"Someone has to smile / at her as she comes back from the bathroom. / Do you think everything can stay the same, / like a photograph?"⁷⁵ Unlike Penelope, Violet has not waited for her Odysseus. Rather, she has turned against him, angered by his failure to come home. She resents his letters and the way that they made her pine for him; she resents the war and the way it disrupted her life and dreams.

Looking at Violet's reaction in the context of the journey of the mythic hero, we see that Violet's rejection means total defeat for Jack. His loss of her is more significant than his loss of courage on the battlefield. For, in myth, the woman is the symbol of victory:

She is the 'other portion' of the hero himself -- for "each is both": if his stature is that of world monarch she is the world, and if he is a warrior she is fame. She is the image of his destiny which he is to release from the prison of enveloping circumstance. But where he is ignorant of his destiny, or deluded by false considerations, no effort on his part will overcome the obstacles.⁷⁶

Jack's grasp of the circumstances is less than adequate and he lacks the self-knowledge to win Violet back. His "journey" has been unsuccessful on all counts. He returns home with a new awareness of the realities of war but without the fulfilling self-knowledge that the mythic hero must have to complete his spiritual passage. Rather than

returning with a heightened awareness of his oneness with God and the universe, he is thrown into despair. In addition, he has lost the woman, the symbol of everything he sought to attain.

The modern hero's journey is thus, in a sense, more perilous than that of the ancient hero. He goes off to battle, unsure of the support of the gods or the righteousness of his cause. The journey he undertakes does not necessarily lead him to greater self-knowledge or bring him closer to the gods. In fact, he often returns diminished, at a loss to re-enter the world and certainly at a loss to better it.

When we consider the uncertain world of America in the Fifties, the heroes of these four plays seem particularly well suited to their times. The heroes of the O'Hara and Ashbery plays are disillusioned men, uncertain of their function and identity in a modern world. While Abel's heroes are more traditionally heroic, they too are torn between acting as individuals and as servants of a higher authority. They wrestle with greatness, aware of both its unfair advantages and of the extraordinary demands that it places upon them. Nowhere in these plays do we find the sureness of the archetypal mythic hero with his confidence in his vision, his mission and his god. The modern hero or

anti-hero of the Artists Theatre stands apart, almost alone, unsure of where his journey will lead or whether it has ended.

Notes to Chapter 3

¹Theodore L. Gross, The Heroic Ideal in American Literature (New York: Free Press, 1971), p. v.

²Norman Mailer, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," The Idol and the Octopus: Political Writings by Norman Mailer on the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations (New York: Dell, 1968), p. 29.

³Ronald J. Oakley, God's Country: America in the Fifties (New York: Dembner Books, 1986), p. 435.

⁴Lionel Abel, The Intellectual Follies: A Memoir of the Literary Venture in New York and Paris (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984), p. 223.

⁵Herbert Machiz, "The Challenge of a Poetic Theatre," Theatre Arts 40 (February 1956): 88.

⁶Lionel Abel, The Death of Odysseus in Playbook: Five Plays for a New Theatre, vol. 1 (Norfolk: Connecticut: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1956), p.4.

⁷Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Bollingen Series, vol. 17 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949; 2nd edition, 1968), p. 29.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁹This conflict occurs in 2 Samuel, chapters 15-20.

¹⁰Lionel Abel, Absalom in Artists' Theatre: New York, ed. Herbert Machiz (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960), p. 132.

¹¹David is not, however, a likely candidate for rebellion, according to the Bible. Except for his indiscretion with Bathsheba, he is generally portrayed as

the model servant of God. God, in turn, champions his battles, protects him and promises him an eternal dynasty.

¹²In the Bible, God vows that David's line will reign in perpetuity. He and his descendants will never be forsaken (as his predecessor Saul was forsaken) even when they fall into disfavor. God's covenant with David is so significant that we see its religious repercussions even in the the twentieth century, for this dynastic promise ultimately led to "messianism -- the belief that a son of David will arise and restore the fortunes of Israel and usher in the final reign of God." (The Encyclopedia of Religion, s.v. "David," by John Van Seters.)

¹³The Bible tells us that David threw the nation into jeopardy by refusing to punish both Absalom and Amnon. "The initial sacrilege [incest], therefore, will precipitate the destruction of the entire social unit, the family. And because this particular family is the royal family, the social fabric of all Israel will finally be threatened." ("Commentary," The Anchor Bible, by Kyle McCarter, Jr., p. 323.)

¹⁴Absalom, p. 139, 140.

¹⁵"I'm going to take your wives, before your very eyes, and give them to someone else, and he will lie with them in the light of the sun itself -- for though you acted in secret, I shall do this thing in front of all Israel, in front of the sun!" (2 Samuel 12:10-12:12.)

¹⁶"So a tent was pitched for Abishalom [sic] on the roof, and Abishalom went to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel." (2 Samuel: 16:22.)

¹⁷Absalom, p. 183.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 173, 221.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 221.

²⁰Ibid., p. 223.

²¹Odysseus, p. 10.

²²Ibid., p. 11.

²³Ibid., p. 4.

²⁴ This characterization of Odysseus is supported in myth as well as in the play. For example, Odysseus did not willingly join the fight for Helen. When the messenger came for him, he pretended to be insane, sowing his fields with salt instead of seed. It was only when the messenger put his son in front of Odysseus's plow to test the hero's sanity that he relented and joined the battle. (Edith Hamilton, Mythology (Boston: Little, Brown, 1940; New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 181.)

²⁵Odysseus, p. 5.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., p. 13.

²⁸Ibid., p. 16.

²⁹Ibid., pp. 17, 16.

³⁰Ibid., p. 19.

³¹Ibid., p. 8.

³²Absalom, p. 195.

³³Odysseus, p. 20.

³⁴In this and other scenes, "the struggles in his [Odysseus'] personality were projected onto stage objects," according to Herbert Machiz, who directed this particular soliloquy as "a dialogue between the split self." (Machiz, p. 88.)

³⁵Odysseus, p. 43.

³⁶Ibid., p. 23.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), p. 282.

³⁹John Ashbery, The Heroes in Artists' Theatre: New York, ed. Herbert Machiz (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960), p. 53.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 47.

⁴¹Interview with Nell Blaine, New York City, 13 April 1988.

⁴²Heroes, p. 59.

⁴³Ibid., pp. 66-67.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 67.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 59.

⁴⁶Interview with Nell Blaine.

⁴⁷Heroes, p. 71.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 77.

⁴⁹Albert Bermel, Farce (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), p. 23.

⁵⁰Heroes, p. 77.

⁵¹Ibid., pp. 49, 51-52.

⁵²Ibid., p. 58.

⁵³Ibid., p. 73.

⁵⁴Frank O'Hara, Try! Try! in Artists' Theatre: New York, ed. Herbert Machiz (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960), pp. 24, 40.

⁵⁵Esslin, p. 354.

⁵⁶Try! Try!, p. 19.

⁵⁷Esslin, p. 7.

⁵⁸Try! Try!, p. 39.

⁵⁹Ibid., pp. 36, 25.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 37.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 32.

⁶²Ibid., p. 36.

⁶³Ibid., pp. 41-42.

⁶⁴Esslin, p. 353.

⁶⁵Try! Try!, p. 28.

⁶⁶The actual set for Try! Try! included a couch, a free-standing piece that resembled a coat rack and an abstract drawing. Larry Rivers's intention was to give the room an "arty" look, he visualized it "not as an artists' studio but as a friend of an artist's studio." (Interview with Larry Rivers, Telephone, 14 March 1988.)

⁶⁷Try! Try!, pp. 19, 24.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 26.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 24.

⁷⁰Ibid., pp. 28, 23.

⁷¹Ibid., pp. 33-34.

⁷²Ibid., p. 32.

⁷³Ibid., p. 41.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 40.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 41.

⁷⁶Campbell, p. 342.

The term "poetic comedy" brings to mind Elizabethan and Jacobean classics such as A Midsummer Night's Dream, Volpone and As You Like It. An average theatregoer would probably place the beginning and end of this genre well within the lifetimes of Elizabeth I and James for, clever as we may think our modern poets are, we seldom expect them to make us laugh, either on paper or onstage.

For most of us, poetry has more "serious" connotations. Timid high school teachers have left many of their students with the idea that modern poetry is enigmatic. They trained us to recognize it by its inscrutability and by its exploration of "weighty" subjects. Therefore, modern poetry as a source of amusement seems unlikely. And, the prospect of going to the theatre for a jolly evening of "poetic comedy" does not often cross our minds.

As the plays of the Artists Theatre demonstrate, however, poetic comedy did not go out of style after the Renaissance and Restoration. Rare as it is, it still exists. Robert Hivnor's The Ticklish Acrobat and James Merrill's The Immortal Husband are two examples of modern poetic comedy at its best.

James Merrill's The Immortal Husband reworks the classic myth of Tithonus, a mortal, and Aurora, the goddess of dawn (known to the Romans as Eos):

So much did Eos [Aurora] love Tithonos that she begged Zeus to make him immortal. The god assented, but since she had not asked for eternal youth, time made its mark on Tithonos and he lived on and on, feeble both in mind and body. Eos locked him in a chamber, where he babbled on incessantly. Finally, out of pity for him, Eos turned him into a cricket.¹

Although Merrill retains the basic premise of the myth, he moves the play from ancient Greece to nineteenth-century England. Instead of being the son of the king of Troy, Tithonus is a young Englishman born around 1836 to Laomedon, a professional soldier. As in the myth, Tithonus and Aurora marry and have a son, Memnon.

When the play opens, Tithonus' mother has just died. Tithonus, a melancholy youth to start with, throws himself into mourning. As the Gardener observes, his grief is almost "too beautiful. He keeps standing off and admiring it, like he was painting a picture." The grieving Tithonus finds his father and their housekeeper, Mrs. Mallow, too resigned to his mother's death. In his opinion, they cope too well and get on with their lives too quickly. When Mrs. Mallow explains to him that dying is part of life, he objects to her passivity. "That's the terrible compromise you make!"²

The young Tithonus pledges to make no compromises, particularly with death. He plans to marry Aurora, the goddess of dawn, whom he is educating on the art of being human. In return, Aurora has promised to persuade Zeus to grant Tithonus immortality.

As in the myth, Aurora remembers to ask Zeus to make Tithonus immortal but forgets to ask for eternal youth. Seeing how stricken Tithonus is by her mistake, she promises to stay with Tithonus forever. "My youth, when your own is gone, shall be yours--not yours, but at your disposal. Till the end of time."³

In Merrill's updated version of the myth, Tithonus and Aurora marry and travel the world. In Act II, we see them sojourning in Russia in 1894. By Act III, they are in America. The year is 1954 (one year before The Immortal Husband was produced) and Tithonus is now 118. After one hundred years of putting up with the egocentric, uncompromising Tithonus, Aurora does not turn Tithonus into a cricket but does run away with a young American man named Mark, leaving her husband in the care of the Nurse and Enid, the wife of Aurora's lover.

Merrill's play is wholly fantastic. He makes no attempt to justify the leaps in time between acts nor to

explain the presence of the supernatural within the natural world. His characters, too, are not the fully fleshed-out individuals of psychological drama but rather a collection of odd types who act as foils for the main characters.

To emphasize the connections between certain characters, Merrill specifies that certain roles should be doubled in the drama. Although the same two actors play Tithonus and Aurora throughout the play, the rest of the eleven roles are played by four actors. (In the actual production, Machiz followed Merrill's instructions, using make-up, costume, accent and movement to indicate changes in character.)⁴ The doubling is deliberate and enhances the characters because all of the roles played by an actor are related in one or more ways.

For example, the same actor plays Memnon, the son (in myth as well as in the play) of Tithonus and Aurora, as plays Laomedon, the father of Tithonus. This doubling is also practical since Memnon appears only in Act III while Laomedon appears only in Act I. Not only are these two characters related by blood, but they are similar in age (Memnon is sixty-one when he appears in Act III), temperament and profession. Both are elderly, retired soldiers who feel superior because of their war experiences. As Aurora remarks, "He [Memnon] is awfully pompous to be

one's son. I suppose it's the result of a military career. His father's father was the same way."⁵

Merrill also specifies that the same pair of actors play the young, mortal lovers who appear in each act. In Act I, the actors play the Maid and the Gardener on Laomedon's estate. In Act II, they become Fanya and Konstantin, two young Russian lovers. In Act III, they play Enid and Mark.

All three couples, being mortal, serve as foils for the pair of immortal lovers, Aurora and Tithonus. The two young men, Konstantin and particularly Mark, remind us of Tithonus in his youth. They lack interest in and sympathy for the older generation, of which Tithonus (by Act II) is a part. The young girls seem connected mainly by their naivete and childishness, qualities that appear more attractive in Aurora than in her mortal counterparts. The playwright also uses a visual symbol to link the three: they all knit, embroider or speak about doing handiwork.

The most effective doubling in the play is that the same actor portrays the drama's three middle-aged women. Mrs. Mallow, Olga and the Nurse appear, respectively, in the three acts. These "useful" women are unwed; their role is to serve others. Mrs. Mallow is the housekeeper on

Laomedon's estate, Olga serves as the chaperone for the young Russian lovers and the Nurse comes to care for Tithonus when Aurora deserts him.

The playwright provides verbal and visual clues that the three are connected. He specifies that they are to be costumed in black, white and gray. Mrs. Mallow dresses in black, Olga wears a combination of grey, black and white, while the Nurse appears clothed in white. Thus, they stand out from the other characters while appearing related.

Like Laomedon and Memnon, these three women are similar in personality as well as in appearance. Working people, they are practical in their acceptance of life's compromises. Olga tells a horrified Tithonus that she would be happy to exchange love for security, that wealth alone can be a powerful aphrodisiac. "I should myself care for any pliable person who would not only provide me with absolute material comfort but bring about my advancement in the world."⁶

Just as Mrs. Mallow accepts death as a necessary part of existence, Olga finds life's compromises not only essential but also comforting. When Tithonus admires Konstantin's youthful stubbornness, Olga retorts: "Never to compromise? But you pass up a great blessing! Compromise is

to our souls what sleep is to our bodies. And who would choose never to sleep? It is the compromise of the body with death, a delicious thing!"⁷

Unlike Tithonus, the Mallows and Olgas of the world see a certain value in imperfection and unpleasantness. As Olga points out, contrast helps us to separate good from bad. "Agreeable things do pass away. That's how we distinguish them from disagreeable things." In the women's opinion, Zeus' gift to Tithonus is more a curse than a blessing, since as Mrs. Mallow explains, "It may be only the threat of dying presses us to live."⁸

These down-to-earth women serve as foils to the supernatural Aurora. While Aurora seeks out sunshine and brightness, these three tend to be preoccupied with the dark side of things, so much so, in fact, that others notice their inclination to morbidity. In Act I, for example, the maid asks the gardener, "Has Mrs. Mallow got a morbid streak?" while in Act II, Tithonus tells Olga, "You oughtn't to look so much on the dark side!"⁹

As a result of their difference in outlook (and, perhaps, age), Aurora does not get along with either Mrs. Mallow or the Nurse. In Act I, the goddess criticizes the housekeeper for always wearing black. "Granted it does

express the real you, still it's not becoming." In turn, the older women do not support Aurora or appreciate her continual brightness and naiveté. "You have not only the comprehension but the cruelty of a child. One day he will understand that," Mrs. Mallow says to Aurora.¹⁰

These themes of childishness versus maturity and light versus darkness recur throughout the play. As would be expected, light is associated with the goddess, Aurora. For example, the end of the rain in Act I foreshadows Aurora's first entrance. Right before she appears, there is A burst of sunlight on the stage, which has been gradually brightening. Grieg "Morning" music.¹¹ Consequently, whenever Aurora leaves the stage, the weather tends to change. When she goes to town in Act III, both Enid and Tithonus remark that a storm is coming up. After her final exit, the stage is bathed in twilight.

As the goddess of dawn, Aurora's destiny is to live "by pleasure and light." Although Aurora tries to explore being human through Tithonus, her nature predisposes her against curiosity, she never wonders about the "hidden side of things." Like her favorite hobby, photography, her mind captures only surfaces. Thus, her vision remains clear, unambiguous and limited. She purposely avoids darkness and despair.¹² "If people are unhappy, I don't want to know

about it," she tells Tithonus. "I'll do anything--I'll even lie to them!--in order to keep them smiling."¹³ Later in the play she does exactly this; she lies to Enid right before running away with the young woman's husband.¹³

When Tithonus and Aurora are young and in love, the young man succeeds in making Aurora more comfortable with "what people do in the dark." While Aurora is a quick study when it comes to making love, however, her progress in other areas is slower. As Tithonus tells her, "Some part of me is dark and sad, invisible in your brightness. Understanding will be the day you come to me suffering, or with a capacity for suffering. Understanding has more to do with tears than with smiling."¹⁴

Once Zeus grants him immortality, Tithonus too becomes less capable of distinguishing between light and dark. His life becomes devoid of mystery or ambiguity. There is no contrast, no night to provide the dawn with meaning. As he explains to Olga: "A dawn, an everlasting dawn! -- but for me, no night, no tempest, no cause to rejoice in it. I long for that night in which things lose themselves, the dark negative of my soul, my mild, trivial, terrible soul."¹⁵

Although he and Aurora have traveled everywhere and done everything, his experiences have proved meaningless. "I

have remembered everything and experienced nothing. Sunlight in cities, brilliance of theatres, the phosphorescence of names and places in the mind bent on darkness -- nothing but light! light! light! It is not to be borne."¹⁶ Tithonus lives the "ideal" life that he envisioned as a young man, yet he finds it unsatisfying. As a result, he remains a whining youth. No matter how old he gets, he still seems immature compared to the "dark" Mrs. Mallow and Olga.

Just as Tithonus does not live happily ever after, Aurora's experiment in mortality ultimately fails. She tires of being human and rejects the alien darkness in which Tithonus has tried to envelop her. Much as she has tried to be human, she cannot escape her destiny, as Mark points out to her:

Oh, Aurora, you're so lovely and young, you can't not be all of that, even to please your lover. . . . He wants you old and dim, he wants to drag you down with him into some kind of horrible endless twilight.¹⁷

Mark reminds us of the young Tithonus in that he has no patience or respect for old age. He has no sympathy for Tithonus' regression into what Jaques in As You Like It described as "second childishness." When Tithonus babbles, Mark observes, "With children you have to keep changing their pants. When they're old it's their mouths you can't

control." Aurora echoes his observation when she instructs Mark on the proper way to carry Tithonus. "It's the same as picking up a baby, you just want to be careful the head doesn't drop off ."18

Mark wants to protect Aurora from Tithonus, whom he sees as draining Aurora's vitality. Although he will not repeat Tithonus' mistake of asking for immortality, Mark wants to run away with Aurora and bask in her brightness and beauty. The goddess warns Mark to beware of her facility but the latter is determined to break away from Enid. Mark prefers the ease of being with Aurora to the difficulty of appreciating his wife, who must be loved more for her "hidden" qualities since she is not conventionally beautiful nor does she have a sunny disposition.

Mark urges Aurora not to feel guilty about leaving Tithonus, who "has twined himself about you like mistletoe." His remark echoes that of the Gardener who, in Act I, asks Laomedon if he might cut down the mistletoe in the garden since it is a parasite (like Tithonus). The destructive parasite, however, seems to be time. The latter has a way of enveloping us, as the Nurse explains, time is like "a soft thread wound, endlessly, about you."19

This image of being enclosed and imprisoned runs through the play and was used by director Herbert Machiz to show Tithonus' drastic leaps in age between acts:

As a young man in Act I he was alive and restless, in Act II, he had become somewhat sedentary, . . . his movements [restricted] to the easel at which he was painting; while in the last act Tithonus was swathed in blankets like a baby, and literally carried onstage.²⁰

As Act III progresses, Tithonus becomes successively more entwined. When Mark carries him in, only his withered head sticks out from his robes. Enid then wraps him in a scarf to warm him. Finally, Aurora enfolds Tithonus in a blanket like something wrapped away for winter. As Mark observes, "That cover has the look of a cocoon."²¹ The irony is that Tithonus will never emerge from this cocoon. His body is immortal but the rest of him has disintegrated. He resembles a mummy more than a human being for he is preserved but no longer truly "alive," at least in any meaningful sense.

In The Immortal Husband, as in many myths and folktales, the gods give a man what he asks for only to have him realize, too late, that he requested the wrong gift or, as in the case of Tithonus, was not specific enough about what he wanted. Tithonus wanted to break out of the natural rhythms of life. Immortality would, he thought, set him free. Instead, it imprisons him. Rather than never

becoming old and staid like his own father, he is condemned to eternal old age.

Tithonus' fate is a terrible one but Merrill does not let us become overly concerned about the protagonist. Tithonus is too unlikable and ridiculous a character for us to sympathize with him. His egocentricity never abates from childhood onward. Even at sixty, he demands to be the center of attention. He always directs the conversation back to himself and always assumes that his welfare should be the major concern of all those with whom he comes in contact. As Olga observes: "What an egotist you are! First you imagine that I want you to make love to me, next that I want to hear about your life!" Thus, instead of feeling sorry for Tithonus, we end up sympathizing with those who have to put up with him. By Act III, for example, we pity the goddess Aurora who has had to deal with his self-centeredness for over a century. "He has never wanted to know what I was feeling. He has never known, it has always been himself," she tells Mark.²² Aurora did not foresee that this outcome was inevitable since only an utterly self-absorbed individual would have wanted eternal life.

We even feel sorry for Tithonus' pompous son, Memnon. Memnon is caught in an untenable generation gap, between his

ancient father and his eternally young mother. As he explains to Enid, "They used to look on me like some kind of freak, you know, being human and all." He adds that he has "been sensitive ever since to people making fun of me" and that his childhood experiences soured him on starting his own family.²³ Memnon's self-analysis touches Enid but it is also rather funny, coming, as it does, from a sixty-one year old retired general.

Like his grandfather, Memnon enjoys his status as retired soldier. As a modern man, however, he has opportunities that Laomedon never did: he can try to "cash in" on his war experiences by writing his memoirs.

The character of Memnon was probably particularly funny and recognizable to the postwar audience of the Artists Theatre. A satirical portrait of the soldier turned businessman, Memnon enters looking more like a corporate executive than a retired general, dressed in a double-breasted business suit, with loud tie and steel-rimmed glasses. He carries a briefcase and before long will light a cigar.²⁴

Mark picks up on Memnon's mercenary streak, suggesting that he call his book, From Ranks to Riches. Memnon jots the idea down, having abandoned an earlier title, Old

Soldiers Never Die, because he worried about "how Dad would take it." When Enid suggests that he write at his father's house, Memnon (ever alert to the demands of the market) explains that even a retired general has to do more than write to insure book sales. ". . . you can't go into seclusion just to write a book. You've got to keep in the public eye! You go after honorary degrees, you lay cornerstones! Show them you're still full of beans!"²⁵ (He promises, however, to send her an autographed copy of the book.)

Memnon's grandfather, Laomedon, was equally self-important. In Act I, he gives Tithonus a nineteenth century version of the "when I was your age" lecture: "At your age I had lived through three battles. I was the youngest Englishman to witness the signing of the Treaty of Amiens." Laomedon's speeches are not only pompous but cliché-ridden. When Tithonus tries to get him to show some genuine emotion over his wife's death, Laomedon responds with proverbs and platitudes. "Life is hard and suffering the common lot," he tells Tithonus. "As Doctor Johnson said, the hope that we shall meet our loved ones again must support the mind."²⁶

In his early years, Tithonus rebels against his father's maxims and makes fun of his own son for using

clichés. By Act III, however, he has difficulty creating an original sentence. He repeats all the platitudes that he once ridiculed and rejected. In fact, his last line in the play is, "A watched pot never boils." Although he once saw clichés as the banner of old and staid people, Tithonus has, perhaps, concluded that overuse does not make them less valid. As Laomedon advised him in his youth: "You may scoff at your father's maxims, as I once did. That will not make them less true. They are convenient expressions of profound human laws."²⁷

These laws guide Laomedon's conduct. Therefore, he is not thrilled with his son's choice of a supernatural wife. As far as he is concerned, Aurora is leading his son down the road to ruin, away from all that is respectable. He lectures her as though she were a schoolgirl instead of a goddess:

I know who you are. And I know my place. But since you have condescended to meddle with human affairs, and with my son's life in particular, it wouldn't hurt you to learn how sensible people think down here--whatever the thinking processes may be where you come from.²⁸

Laomedon obviously does not see the gods' logic as necessarily superior to his own. As far as he is concerned, their way of thinking and running things is probably not quite up to human standards. With this speech, Merrill underlines the irony of man's relationship to the gods or

God: man's understanding of the supernatural is destined to be limited since he can only understand the gods from his own experience. An earlier remark by the Gardener reinforces this idea. According to him, Aurora's behavior should be judged according to human standards. When the maid remarks that Aurora has never done anything goddesslike or out-of-the-ordinary, he replies, "Of course she doesn't send off fireworks every quarter of an hour. She's not vulgar."²⁹

Aurora herself reinforces the idea that the gods live by standards of courtesy and behavior that are not that different from those of human beings. She describes Zeus to Tithonus as a temperamental patriarch who has to be coddled by his subjects. In asking for a wish, "There's a whole etiquette involved. You have to sort of crouch beside him, with your left hand on his knees and your right hand fiddling with his beard -- like Thetis in that Ingres painting."³⁰ From her description, we conclude that the god, like man, has an ego.

Merrill also satirizes the gods' view of man. Aurora, for example, is amused by Tithonus' lesson plans for her education as a human. From her perspective, there is a vast, rather ludicrous array of subjects that come under the heading of mortality. When Tithonus quizzes her, she responds by teasing him. "Last time we took up -- let me

see, was it pain? Sportsmanship? One's brotherhood to the ape?"³¹

Although she jokes with Tithonus, Aurora does seriously attempt to become mortal. By Act III, however, she concludes that she has failed, at least by Tithonus' standards. As she explains to Mark:

I know I'm not human. It's not for lack of trying. I've wanted to suffer! I've shed tears. I've borne a child. I've been faithful to Tithonus, not that I've had to be by any means. But I wanted to go through what people go through. I haven't wanted to snap my fingers and fly off in a glittering machine. I've done my best, but it hasn't really worked. I haven't suffered enough, I suppose.³²

That this is the "truth" that Tithonus has chosen to teach Aurora shows just how conventional a man he is. His ideas are no more progressive than his father's, who believed (as most organized religions do) that human beings were born to suffer. Mark, on the other hand, insists to Aurora that her education has been faulty. According to him, suffering does not make one human. As far as he is concerned, being human is something more basic. "I've always thought it was something you were born with."³³

In The Immortal Husband, human beings teach gods and gods teach human beings. Each educates the other, although not always accurately. The interplay between the natural and supernatural, however, does make for compelling theatre.

Much of the charm of the play lies, in fact, in the comic way that Merrill integrates the immortal characters into the natural world. For example, the play's central nuclear family includes one goddess, one immortal husband and one highly traumatized child who will not outlive either of his parents.

What is also funny is the way that the human beings in The Immortal Husband routinely accept the presence of a goddess like Aurora. Her supernatural powers do not seem to overawe them, perhaps because, outwardly, she looks, dresses and speaks like a mortal. She can even be annoying. Unlike mortals, however, Aurora neither changes nor learns, a difference that Machiz tried to dramatize by directing Aurora to react with childlike surprise to each new discovery. "I insisted on her reacting with naive delight to each earthly object, like a child discovering a new toy," recalls Machiz. "She was subject to no inhibitions or rules--unlike the other characters of the play, who reflected the manners and mores of their time and place."³⁴

In addition to Aurora and Tithonus, the Nurse who appears in Act III may also be a supernatural creature. As she explains to Aurora. "I'm not the sort of woman one sends for. I am not hired by the hour."³⁵ Although Aurora

goes to the village to pick her up, the Nurse insists to Enid that she did not come from there.

Merrill puts not only the supernatural onstage but also the unconscious. He stretches the world of the play to include the dream life of the characters. For example, he specifies that the entire last scene of the play (in which the Nurse appears and takes charge of Tithonus) can be interpreted as a dream. Once Enid and Tithonus fall asleep, It is conceivable that she [Enid] and Tithonus dream this final scene. The playwright may even suggest that all of the preceding action has been a dream, depending upon our interpretation of one remark from Enid to Tithonus. Before the final scene, Tithonus asks in his sleep, "My love, my love, was it a dream?" Enid answers, "Be still. It is a dream."³⁶

Real or imagined, Tithonus' experiences in The Immortal Husband are dreamlike in that they are nightmarish. Immortality does not turn out as the protagonist envisioned. Instead of living a fuller, happier life, Tithonus exists without experiencing anything. His deepest fears have been realized: he is empty inside. In Act I, he tells Laomedon, "You're dry inside, dry and old, and that's somehow far worse than dying." By Act II, however, he confesses to Olga that he can no longer feel: "My heart is as dry as dust!"³⁷

The young Tithonus believed that immortality would help him to approach life more bravely, more uncompromisingly, since he would not have to face death and change. "Change is what I've always hated -- to see people, like leaves on fire, twisted and crumpled by life," he explains. Unfortunately, Aurora's omission (not asking for eternal youth) sentences him to eternal changes, eternal aging. Nor do the additional years add meaning. As he tells Konstantin: "All the young men are talking about purpose nowadays. It may be that I did so myself as a young man, but I have forgotten."³⁸

As a young man, Tithonus wanted to paint. Art, after all, would give his subjects as well as himself a certain degree of his beloved immortality. He had confidence in his ability, it was merely a matter of deciding on a subject. "Possibly a Massacre of the Innocents -- or else a pastoral scene of some sort, Pan among Nymphs, " he tells his father. When he meets Konstantin in Act II, Tithonus is already sixty years old. He is beginning to feel estranged from the younger generation and far less in touch with the clear, unambiguous vision of his youth. Although he climbs to the top of the mountain to paint the Russian village below, his picture ends up being of the leaves that obscure his view. This angers Konstantin, who cries: "The village has vanished! There are only the dimmest traces left on your

canvas -- a few odd shapes, a few drab colors, like a village destroyed by fire."³⁹ Konstantin, like Tithonus in his younger years, is frustrated by ambiguity. He wants everything to be clear and uncompromised.

In Konstantin and later Mark, we see Tithonus' younger self. Like him, these young men struggle against compromise, against becoming as passive and accepting as their fathers. Konstantin, a self-proclaimed nihilist, believes that his philosophy will free him from the constrictions of time, place and age while Mark tries to escape reality through Aurora, who lives only by pleasure and sunlight.

As Tithonus' experience demonstrates, however, the odds of a human being besting the gods are slim. Locked in mortal combat with the supernatural, man can struggle but never get the upper hand. At best, he retains his dignity and becomes a tragic figure. At worst, he becomes comic and ridiculous like Tithonus, the immortal husband.

Robert Hivnor's poetic comedy, The Ticklish Acrobat is more "earthbound" than The Immortal Husband but no less fanciful and imaginative.⁴⁰ As the critic Richard Hayes pointed out in his 1954 review: "Mr. Hivnor has employed a conventional realistic frame (a remote Dalmatian village, perfectly acceptable on its material terms) but it should

not obscure for us the profound impulse to fantasy which controls his imagination."⁴¹

A highly theatrical farce, The Ticklish Acrobat seems to have everything. Acrobatics, dance, hypnosis, slapstick, poetry, marriages, mental breakdowns and even attempted murder. Its characters, who speak in both poetry and prose, range from a tattooed circus freak to a mystic/psychotherapist.

The play begins and ends in Pomo, a remote village in Yugoslavia.⁴² This settlement has long been forgotten by the outside world for it has no conventional value. No precious minerals. No roads. No water. Bad cheese. Wormy goats and wine that tastes like poison. Since Pomo has so few "pluses," few come to visit or to stay. Its only new residents are two Americans, Ellie Sprocket, a woman of about thirty, and Joe Zanelli, a former baseball player who has come to claim the woman he loves.

Zanelli loves Anna Zugo, the youngest member of an acrobatic dynasty that resides in Pomo. The "ticklish acrobat" of the title, Anna Zugo is a contradiction in terms, an acrobat who cannot be caught. On the ground or in the air, touch her and she squirms. As a result of her

ticklishness, her entire family has suffered, as Zanelli observes:

They look like they been in a wreck They used to climb eighty feet in the air, Papa, Mama, Victor here, and Anna. They would toss each other around until someone put his hands on her and she'd giggle and down they'd come. Mama. Boom. Brother. Boom. Papa. Boom. Then my Anna.⁴³

What are these broken-down acrobats doing in Pomo? The village has the unusual distinction of having been Europe's last "circus town." Pomo was "probably the last place in Europe where the old tumblers and acrobats and tattooed ladies and sword-swallowers and that sort of thing could be seen."⁴⁴ Thus, in addition to the Zugo dynasty, Pomo's residents include Baba Marco, a tattooed lady who, now that her performing career is over and her husband is permanently out-of-town, doubles as the town whore.

With nothing of conventional value to offer the outside world, Pomo's residents have lived virtually undisturbed for centuries. Their trades and rituals have been passed down from generation to generation. For example, Gorjo, the owner of the village's cafe and wineshop, learned the business from his father. He sets up his tables the same way that his father and his father's father did. As the play opens, we see Gorjo's "regulars" go through their morning ritual. The muezzin wakes them

and, one by one, they groggily stumble into his cafe for a morning brandy. They exchange the traditional Pomonian greeting ("God bless you") and reminisce about happier times. They also warily discuss a rare development for Pomo: the arrival of a stranger.

Uncle Henry, the firm holder of an unimportant post in the U.S. State Department, has come to Pomo to see his niece, Ellie, and to respond to some petitions made to the U.S. on behalf of the town by its mayor, Bomogrica. Unfortunately (but predictably), none of the proposed projects have been approved. As Henry explains to Bomogrica, there is no logic in developing Pomo.⁴⁵ Why build a dam when there's no water? Why search for precious minerals when there are none? Why build a bridge that will only lead "nowhere," i.e. to Pomo? As it is, Pomo is useless to the modern world.

The only petition accepted was by a foundation that wants to dig up Pomo and see what it was. This foundation turns out to be one man, an American archeologist named Bassett Pratt. Pratt is not your average archeologist, however. His discoveries bring him no pleasure; he digs up the past in order to destroy rather than preserve it. He believes in ridding the world of its history, bulldozing the past in order to free the future from the old, confusing

influences. Pratt does not believe in God. Therefore, he works to create a spanking new, purely scientific world in which disturbing questions about theology and mysticism do not exist.

Pratt versus Pomo, American versus European, foreign versus native. While The Ticklish Acrobat never gets bogged down in philosophizing, it manages to explore the confrontation between old and new on a number of different levels.

For example, the Americans in Pomo are all there to get something from the town. "He rapes Pomo a little at a time." says Father Zugo of Pratt. Then pointing to Joe Zanelli, he adds, "He does the same to Anna."⁴⁶ Despite their disruptive influence, however, the outsiders manage to have a positive influence on the town. Its acrobats begin performing again and the town even resurrects its harvest festival. Thus, the foreign presence disturbs but also revitalizes Pomo.

Using a wide range of theatrical devices, Hivnor effectively dramatizes the consequences (for both sides) of this sudden "invasion" on the tranquil, long forgotten European settlement. For example, he makes the physical consequences of Pratt's undertaking clear through

imaginative changes in the set. In the course of only three acts, the set is transformed from an ancient Yugoslavian town to a nineteenth century circus town to a medieval Roman fort to a Greek temple.

When the play begins, we see only a square, surrounded by three stone houses. The house on the left hand side, where Ellie is staying, is more Western European in style, with French windows. Between the houses are east and west entrances to the plaza. The natives always enter the square only from the houses or from these two entrances. None of them know the reason behind this tradition (until the end of the play, when we learn that the square is sacred ground, the former site of a Greek temple) but no one ever questions or deviates from it. Pratt's first entrance, therefore, comes as a shock to the natives because he enters the plaza not in one of the usual four ways but comes on a straight line and undeflected by any obstacle. ⁴⁷

Pratt wastes no time in getting his dig started. Moments after he arrives (in scene one), he begins to transform the village. By the second scene, the set already looks different: nineteenth century folk architecture becomes visible beneath the original Mediterranean facade. The transformation is not complete but where Pratt he has peeled away the walls, we can see:

bright pinks and blues and around windows and doors and along cornices somewhat schmaltzy peasant painting of, on the one hand, out-of-scale classical ornament and, on the other, those strange designs of the circus wagons.⁴⁸

By Act II, Scene 1 (weeks later), only remnants of these two previous sets remain. A medieval fortress has taken their place. Pratt's discovery delights the mayor, Bomogrica, and Uncle Henry, both of whom take a certain "macho" pride in learning that Pomo has a military history. For the first time, Uncle Henry approves of the village. "There'll be reveille and not that damned Mohammedan. Congratulations." Bomogrica too is elated. He puts on (what we assume is) his only uniform (The Bicycle Corps) and starts making plans to reman the fort. Never at a loss for inventing fictional Pomonian history, Bomogrica announces: "We're a proud and hardy people. Soldiering comes naturally to us. Uniforms, guns, pensions." Pratt, disgusted by the men's reaction, tries to disillusion them by pointing out that Pomo has no glorious war history. On the contrary, the Romans used the fort to oppress the people of Pomo. "It has never been your fort. Your proud and hardy people have never manned it. They died in heaps outside it."⁴⁹

The irony of the situation does not faze either Bomogrica or Henry, and both protest loudly when Pratt announces his plans to bulldoze the fort.

Before Pratt can act, however, the Zugos appear, appealing to the authorities to prevent Joe Zannelli from loving their daughter. When Bomogrica proves ineffectual, the Zugos pull out an eighteenth century pistol and fire away at Zannelli. They miss and the question of tearing down the fort becomes moot. As it begins to topple, the remains of a Greek temple emerge.

By Act II, Scene 2, the entire temple is revealed. Its boundaries encompass the square and the entire set looks more open and rustic (because we can see through the columns to the foothills beyond). By the last act, the temple has been fully restored, much to Pratt's dismay. Now the setting and the entrance patterns of Pomo's natives assume their full significance.

The last scene opens as the first one did, but the idea is that many of the same actions (avoiding the center of the square, and so on)⁵⁰ make sense in the religious context of the temple.

Obviously, the natives have always respected the sacred ground without even knowing about it.

As his creative use of setting indicates, Hivnor has a strong visual sense. The set is not just a backdrop but an active, intricate part of the drama. As it evolves, the play evolves. As it changes, the town changes. However, the excavations take the town backward, not forward, to what it

once was rather than to some modern idea of what it should become.

Aside from their thematic value, the constant changes in the set help to anchor the play firmly in the realm of farce. The changes in setting are so dramatic and quick as to be fantastic and farcical. Pratt literally rips down one facade after another. (Although Julian Beck's set was abstract, Robert Hivnor has stated that he pictured the sets as being somewhat cartoonlike. Thus, they would lend themselves to these rapid, fantastic transformations.)⁵¹

The setting also "lives" in that it preys upon the characters. As in many farces, the characters are victims of an environment which is unstable and unpredictable and keeps them continually off-balance. Much of the play's visual and physical humor stems from the natives' inability to keep pace with the physical changes Pratt makes. As their familiar landmarks disappear, they become more and more bewildered. Like machines, they try to maintain their old patterns, even in the face of impossible obstacles. They are so resistant to change that even Ellie, who romanticizes all the drawbacks of Pomo and its natives, becomes frustrated. "Why don't these natives use their native intelligence?" she asks.⁵²

For example, they try to keep entering the square along the traditional paths, despite Pratt's excavations. As a result, they fall. First Baba tumbles, then Mrs. Hurabi, a woman whose ritual it is to carry a vase of water through the town each day, never spilling a drop. Pratt's changes make it impossible for her to move with her usual machinelike precision, however, and when she falls, there is a catastrophe of bracelets, veils, shirtwaists, and three or four petticoats.⁵³ Although she is not seriously hurt (characters in farce tend to spring back unharmed from physical collisions) she cries until the doctor arrives to cure her. The latter kicks her in the backside and much to our amazement, she stops moaning and goes on her way. Again, this slapstick touch alerts us that we are in the province of farce, as does the improbability of the doctor's action.

The constant changes in environment are particularly distressing to Gorjo, who is half-blind from age and who relies for survival on his daily ritual. The more Pratt changes Pomo, the more disoriented Gorjo becomes. He forgets how to wait on tables and, at one point, even forgets that he is in Pomo. Putting on his hat and coat, he says, "It's nice here. But I must go back to Pomo."⁵⁴ Only after Baba convinces him that it is still his shop (he can tell only by the smell), does he consent to stay.

Aside from spoofing the machinelike nature of human beings (à la Bergson), Hivnor satirizes different types of characters. In The Ticklish Acrobat, he is particularly adept at satirizing professional types such as government officials, scientists and doctors, those pillars of society who would patronize and lead the natives. Uncle Henry, for example, is a foreign service representative who, typically, has no interest whatsoever in service or foreign lands. The natives of Pomo recognize this and are quick to label him and his type as vultures. "They live on the dead," observes Baba. "When they show up it's the beginning of the end."⁵⁵

Bomogrica, another politician, is equally useless to the natives. Although he seems to have Pomo's best interests at heart, his pomposity makes him a ridiculous figure. The playwright describes him as the "mayor of all Pomo" in the cast list but tells us in his comic stage directions that, by sight, it's difficult to place Bomogrica: He is an official-looking person of (a guess) Turkish origin, but what kind of official, prefect, commissioner, it is impossible to say. Bomogrica himself seems reluctant (or, perhaps, unable) to clarify his position. When Ellie asks him, "Is it Mayor, Prefect, Commissioner?", Bomogrica replies, "Just call me friend."⁵⁶ An ineffectual liason between the natives and the outsiders,

the mayor alternates between conspiratorial whispering and bold, pompous speeches.

No matter what Bomogrica's vocal volume, much of what the mayor says makes little sense because he loves to exaggerate. For example, Pratt's arrival (and the subsequent anticipation of some great historical discovery in Pomo) inspire him to make a bold, nonsensical pronouncement about Pomo's past:

Our Shakespeares lived before your Christ.
 We had a French Revolution before Charlemagne.

Our miracles of science came before the wheel. Hence
 civilized love was first made in Pomo."

 The first lovers came from Pomo.⁵⁷

In The Ticklish Acrobat, as in most farces, the abnormal becomes normal (and the improbable becomes probable). Thus, some of the natives actually take Bomogrica seriously, compounding the satire. When Bomogrica refuses the family's appeal to stop Zanelli from loving Anna, Father Zugo reproaches him, "That uniform. That bicycle pump in gold / Upon your shoulder. It means nothing?"⁵⁸

Another comical character, Dr. Sufi, also considers himself a pillar of the Pomo community. A self-proclaimed Renaissance man, he claims to be not only a medical doctor but also a psychotherapist. He modestly announces:

I'm no demigod, no saint, no virgin.
 Casting out the devil. I'm just
 The greatest psychotherapeutic human being in the
 world.

He gained his scientific credentials without ever learning
 to read:

I was brilliant from birth.
 Took only scientific subjects.
 Went directly to medical school.⁶⁰

In addition, Sufi is a spiritualist. He claims to
 feel such a oneness with nature that he carries the idea of
 "not hurting a fly" to an extreme, wearing little bells on
 his shoes to alert the insects in his path. He is also an
 occasional celibate.

While the natives tend to defer to Dr. Sufi, the
 Americans in Pomo do not take him seriously. Joe calls him
 a "quack" and Uncle Henry remarks, "I wish all the frauds of
 this world had bells on." Ellie sees him as useful but
 limited, "He's very good for a back rub actually."⁶¹

Sufi, in turn, is quite critical of America and
 Americans. As the only native who has visited the U.S., he
 feels compelled to warn the others about what he learned.
 His comments not only reflect comically back on his
 character but also provide a humorous satire on the United
 States. For example, he tells Anna Zugo:

No, you wouldn't like America.
 The rich foods there! The puddings!
 The milkshakes! All that unfermented sugar!⁶²

Although Sufi's American travel itinerary was somewhat unconventional (he visited "Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Minneapolis, / All those not-yet-sacred places."), he claims to know a great deal about a wide range of subjects. "In the States the men are the means of production and the women control the men," he announces. Sufi also observes that America has "No culture / Yet everyone reads and writes."⁶³ Coming from a non-literate scientist, this almost makes sense. The line also probably proved popular with the artists and writers in Hivnor's audience.

Sufi is an expert on American women not only because of his travels but because once he fell in love with one. As Baba points out, he makes much of his days in a monastery but he did not join the order until he was fifty. He and "Lucy" fell in love at first sight (like Zanelli and Anna) but she had one "fault": character.

I taught her to smoke tobacco, drink wine, dance two-by-two. No use. She had character. She lost her virtue between yawns, so to speak, but she still had character. It was at that moment that I realized I was in the grip of an historical situation. . .⁶⁴ As a mystic I don't like historical situations.

Aside from Lucy, Ellie is the only American woman that Sufi, or for that matter any of the natives, have ever

encountered. Ellie presents herself as an incurable romantic, innocent to the core. She turns out, however, to be one of the most calculating characters in the play. Although she continually chides Pratt about being a cold, unfeeling scientist, the truth is that she is at least as pragmatic and manipulating, if not more.

Seemingly soft on the outside but tough on the inside, Ellie is relentless in her pursuit of Pratt. Once she researches his financial background and discovers he is a good marital candidate, he doesn't have a chance. She finds out the circumstances of his trust (by farcical coincidence, it is administered by Ellie's puritanical uncle in the States) and waits for an opportunity to go to bed with Pratt. Her mission accomplished, she and Uncle Henry blackmail the archeologist into making an "honest woman" of her. To seal the deal, the two make sure that the engagement announcement is printed in the States before Pratt even agrees to the marriage.

Through it all, blackmail included, Ellie persists in playing the romantic. When Pratt protests that he "seduced her like a river seduces the ocean," Ellie pretends to be taken aback. "Has the word love disappeared from the councils of men?" she asks. Calculating as she is, Ellie is loath to be seen as anything but Pomo's resident romantic.

She even tries to convince Uncle Henry, her co-extortionist, that her tryst with Pratt was motivated by passion, that it was a kind of sacrifice to the gods on the night of Pomo's historical festival. Henry, ever the pragmatist (particularly when it comes to Ellie) remains skeptical. "I hope . . . that you're not confusing a sacrifice [her virginity] with an investment."⁶⁵

Although her character provides a humorous caricature of the calculating American woman, Ellie is also, to some degree, the incurable romantic that she professes to be. For example, she tends to idealize Pomo. When Uncle Henry compares it unfavorably to Western Europe, Ellie rises to the town's defense.

Paris and Florence aren't Europe.
They're market places. ⁶⁶ Here, in old Dalmatia,
Here is the true Europe.

She glamorizes even the most mundane aspects of native life. The natives emptying the slops are performing "a ballet of bodies and souls" while the women carrying water walk as "they walk in Heaven."⁶⁷

Like most foreigners, however, Ellie is content to have only a superficial understanding of the native culture. She claims to adore the ritual wakeup call of the muezzin but when Uncle Henry asks her what the religion of Pomo is,

she finds herself at a total loss. "A beautiful combination, I'd say. Moslem. / Orthodox. Roman Catholic."⁶⁸

Ellie also idealizes her role in Pomo. She likes to see herself as "Lady Bountiful," helping the natives.

One of the reasons I love it is
That I'm part of the life. I don't sojourn:
I reside, I live, I help.⁶⁹

Although Ellie claims to be accepted, Hivnor shows us, visually and verbally, just how out-of-place she is. For example, she cannot even do the correct native handshake. She tries the simple one-shake-per-person method of the country, but she is at once too feeling and too physical.⁷⁰

Hivnor visually dramatizes the difference between the foreigners and the natives with the character of Joe Zanelli as well. The latter's physical demeanor makes him stand out, his swagger and somewhat overly violent movements contrast with the tighter, economical movements of the natives.⁷¹

Joe is the all-American guy. He is "handsome, manly, athletic" like an American movie star. He played second base for the Cardinals, fought in the war and likes to talk sports and women with other Americans, like Pratt and Henry. He calls Pratt "Jack" and admiringly observes, "Man, I see you're the kind of Yank that speaks to other Yanks."⁷²

In one of the great, improbable coincidences of farce, Zanelli "fell for" Anna in mid-air while parachuting into Pomo during World War II. By another tremendous coincidence, he also parachuted directly into the Zugos' net. As he explains to Pratt:

I'm just coming to, still in the air, blood all over my face and I hear this music and then I see coming toward me through the air this babe -- her hands were together like she was praying -- praying in tights -- yellow hair--little tiny feet--beautiful eyes--and she smiled. Then she fell and her old man or somebody caught her. And guess where I came⁷³ down! In the net! It was like I was part of the act.

Zanelli has returned to claim Anna only to encounter resistance from the older generation (another typical set-up in farce). The elder Zugos (in the fine tradition of the Capulets, Montagues and other famous theatrical parents) do not want their daughter to marry an outsider. They don't really know Zanelli. Besides, being acrobats has made them particularly appreciative of the difficulties of maintaining a good marriage, as Mother Zugo explains: "When you look up, think how carefully we must argue / To catch each other right. It's not only / Our gymnastics the Kings and Ministers of Europe/ applaud. / Some of them are married too."⁷⁴

In addition to the family's opposition, Anna's ticklishness seems to be a deterrent to any great romance.

Therefore, Joe, as well as her family, have a vested interest in trying to cure Anna. Although the Zugos have asked Dr. Sufi to try psychotherapy, Joe persuades them to let him first try a method that is popular back home, hypnosis. Sufi, ever eager for a scientific "experiment," agrees.

Zanelli claims he has good credentials as a hypnotist. Back in the States, he and his pals used to hypnotize girls at parties, to "get them to wash the dishes and that sort of thing." Convinced that Anna's ticklishness is "deep" ("It has something to do with the sex set-up," he explains to Baba), he attempts to cure Anna by putting her under his spell.⁷⁵

The cure proves as laughable as Anna's "disease." Part of the humor comes from Zanelli's improbable choice of a hypnotic situation. He puts Anna, a sixteen year-old virgin, into a trance in which she is a girl of "easy virtue" out "parking" with him on a Saturday night. Zanelli has Anna lolling around an imaginary car seat, sucking her tooth, chewing gum. "You've been around. Tried the pack. I've been around. Played the field," he tells her. No doubt this is Zanelli's idea of an irresistible romantic situation. As he moves in to touch her, however, Anna bursts out laughing. At this point, Sufi steps in and tries to

re-establish his authority. Unknown to Zanelli, Sufi hypnotizes him. He puts Zanelli into a trance and orders him to do typically American things like shower and play baseball. Zanelli snaps out of it, however, when Sufi calls, "Strike four!"⁷⁶

By this point in the treatment session, the patient, Anna, has been forgotten in the frenzied competition between Zanelli and Sufi. The natives watch eagerly as the hypnotic duel continues. Zanelli, awakened by Sufi's faulty knowledge of baseball, puts Sufi into a trance in which the latter is parachuting through space. (The acrobats are particularly interested in this scenario.) When Sufi comes to, he concedes to the crowd that Zanelli is "the greatest / Unmarried psychotherapeutic second baseman in the / world." He then turns around and immediately hypnotizes Zanelli again, instructing him to "bid us all one of those gracious, formless, American farewells."⁷⁷ The American then crawls out backwards on all fours, urging the crowd to look him up when they come to Cleveland.

With Zanelli out of the way, Sufi turns his attention back to Anna. He hypnotizes her into the most serious and frightening situation he can imagine, a confrontation with Death. Even as an old, sick woman meeting her maker, however, Anna giggles. In disgust, Sufi gives up. As it

turns out, Joe is more right than Sufi about how to cure Anna. Not until she loses her virginity does she lose her ticklishness.

These trances and spells are typical of farce, which often deals in the fantastic, as is Hivnor's use of repetition (there are five attempts at hypnosis). The hypnosis sessions also function as plays within the play. The participants act out funny, highly physical scenarios for the crowd/audience. Gorjo and Baba, Pomonian natives who have never been to America, are particularly appreciative of Zanelli's performance. To them, watching him is like seeing a mini-travelogue on America. Although Zanelli only pantomimes the actions, Gorjo is impressed. "First time I ever seen a shower bath," Gorjo says. Later, he observes, "So this is baseball."⁷⁸

Throughout The Ticklish Acrobat, Hivnor employs a kind of hearty theatricalism. The tumbling of the acrobats, the baseball pantomimes are all typical of the kind of "pure" theatrical elements used in farce and in the later Theatre of the Absurd. Unlike other, more literary-minded poets of the Artists Theatre, Hivnor pays fairly constant attention to the visual elements of the play. In addition to the physical humor of the hypnosis sessions, the acrobats do their routine (three times) and Baba Marco also shows off

her tattoos. In addition, Hivnor stages the Pomo festival, complete with dancers.

The playwright also almost constantly subverts our expectations. Instead of being a joyous occasion, the festival ends up feeling more like an "outdoor wake." The Zugos perform in their usual crippled fashion while the festival dancers appear equally ill at ease. As Pratt observes, their dance, rather than being light-hearted and free, is "so complicated and rigorous that they all seem on the point of exhaustion."⁷⁹

Selected as King of the Feast, Zanelli enters in his baseball uniform, which is about as apropos for the festival as Bomogrica's Bicycle Corps outfit was for the fort. Zanelli is initially flattered by being chosen as King, particularly since he has been trying to convince the Zugos that he is not a "peasant," that, in fact, being a baseball player means being a kind of royalty in America. ("Imagine a peasant at second-base for the Cardinals!").⁸⁰ His elation wears off quickly, however, when the dancers proceed to beat him with their flails and then throw him over the cliff.

Zanelli, of course, does not die or get hurt. He, like most characters in farce, is indestructible. Just as the Zugos are not irreparably damaged by their falls,

Zanelli reappears in the next scene unharmed. Even Pratt, who suffers a nervous breakdown, is not seriously ill. Rather he regresses into a childlike passivity. In farce, rarely does a character get seriously hurt. Rather, like Joe, they get knocked around but spring back virtually uninjured. This prevents the audience from taking their plight too seriously. Instead, we concentrate on the play's visual and verbal humor.

Verbal humor abounds in The Ticklish Acrobat. Some characters are unintentionally funny. For example, Joe Zanelli (whose name means "little clowns") often ends up making remarks that reflect back humorously upon him. When Zugos try to persuade him to stop loving Anna, for instance, he announces, "I'll never stop loving her until we're married."⁸¹

The characters also make jokes about each other. Baba has the one of the sharper, more satirical tongues in the play. An old prostitute who has had a tough life, Baba is quick with one-liners and cynical observations. After Zanelli comments that marrying Anna would cure her of her ticklishness, Baba remarks: "She'd never smile again."⁸²

Baba even jokes about her runaway husband, a tattoo artist who used Baba's body like a canvas. "I want to do a

Rubens on a Rubens," he said and applied his needles accordingly. Thus, Baba is a walking museum, a living monument to her husband's eclectic art career.

"Postimpressionism. Cubism. Vorticism. / My god. I've been through them all, " she says.⁸³ With Baba, Hivnor takes a satirical poke at art and artists. When Pratt remarks, "I thought it was the artist who did the suffering," Baba replies, "Great art makes everybody suffer."⁸⁴

Baba's character might also be seen as symbolic of the fine line between objects and people in farce. In many ways, Baba is more an object than a person. Aside from being a walking museum, she is also a prostitute, a person who sells her body for cash. And, before the circus moved away, she made her money by putting her tattoos on display.

Much of the play's verbal humor stems from a lack of understanding among the characters. For example, Ellie tends to listen selectively, she interprets what others say to suit herself. When Pratt tries to tell her that he learned through therapy that he is, at heart, a destroyer of temples and a lover of prostitutes, she pretends not to hear his sordid conclusions. Rather, she interprets him to mean that he is finally seeking God, a home, and the love of a good woman.

In Pratt, Hivnor creates a funny variation on the stereotypical scientist. Pratt is fairly mechanical and unfeeling but, at the same time, he is an emotional powder keg just waiting to explode. As he tells Ellie, he had a nervous breakdown during an earlier dig. This confession foreshadows his demise in Act III, when the combination of the forced engagement plus the natives' resistance to his plan to demolish the temple push him over the edge. Lest we take Pratt's breakdown too seriously, Hivnor adds a comic twist to the situation. As Domogrica and Henry tie up the archeologist to keep him from destroying the temple, Sufi explains to Gorjo, "This is what they call in the States a nervous breakdown."⁸⁵

Hivnor also prevents us from taking Pratt's spiritual crisis too much to heart by tracing it back to his teenage years, when he quit the Green Park Presbyterian baseball team moments before the big play-off because he no longer believed in God. As an adult, spirituality and religion continue to disturb Pratt. Bound in ropes, he violently protests Pomo's decision to preserve the temple. "Don't you see we have to purge these things from history!"⁸⁶

Pratt's determination to demolish the temple pits him against the other characters. Both the natives and foreigners finally recognize that the archeologist's

ultimate mission is not to discover but to destroy. Although Pomo has always been polite to outsiders, Pratt wants to go too far. As Sufi explains, "Mr. Pratt, we have been very tolerant of the disorder caused by your work because we thought you were getting somewhere. Don't you believe that this is somewhere?"⁸⁷

As Sufi mentioned earlier in the play, Pratt is at least the third in a line of outsiders who have tried to unlock Pomo's secrets. In 1878, an archeologist from Germany arrived and, after World War I, an Englishman came. The Pomonians have always tolerated these intrusions but when Pratt wants to destroy their sacred ground, they have to cry "enough."

When the play begins, Pomo's residents long for change but by its end, they recognize that progress, while stimulating, can be disruptive. They seem relieved when, as the play closes, all of the foreigners prepare to leave Pomo.

Hivnor spoofs theatrical tradition by ending the farce in an unconventionally conventional way. Two marriages take place. Ellie weds the crazy archeologist (who by now has regressed into complete passivity), and Joe Zanelli marries Anna, who is no longer ticklish but is now most certainly

pregnant. Both couples leave for America, along with Uncle Henry, who in typical bureaucratic doubletalk, bids the townspeople an ambiguous goodbye:

I want to say now that there are three great pleasures in coming to Pomo. One is the experience of arriving, the unforgettable visual experiences; and second, getting to really know Pomo and its people; and third, leaving Pomo.⁸⁸

With the foreigners gone, the village is returned to the natives, the people who have, without even knowing it, respected its sacred nature. In the play's final moments, they relax at Gorjo's cafe, tranquil smiles on their faces. Pomo is theirs again. It took the foreigners to reassure them of the sacredness of Pomo. Now they will preserve it, at least until the next onslaught from the new world. Sufi closes the play with these lines:

Any violence today.
Any gross movements of any kind,
Let them be done by others.
Watch out!
We will sit down and be harmless.⁸⁹

Both of these comedies focus on fantastic characters and situations. In The Ticklish Acrobat, humor and wisdom is found through the investigation of a long forgotten European settlement and its natives while in The Immortal Husband, an old myth is updated and reexamined for its comic and philosophical potential.

While Hivnor and Merrill consciously make use of, and satirize, traditional theatrical subject matter and techniques, their approach to comedy seems somehow more subtle and probing than their more mainstream counterparts. They go beyond simply dramatizing funny situations from real life. Instead, they create unusual circumstances and characters which, while fantastic, still humorously reflect and clarify the human condition.

Notes to Chapter 4

¹Herbert Spencer Robinson and Knox Wilson, ed., Myths and Legends of All Nations (New York: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1950), p. 67.

²James Merrill, The Immortal Husband in Playbook: Five Plays for a New Theatre, vol. 1. (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1956), p. 167, 173.

³Ibid., p. 191.

⁴Herbert Machiz, "The Challenge of a Poetic Theatre," Theatre Arts 40 (February 1956): 38.

⁵The Immortal Husband, p. 215.

⁶Ibid., p. 203.

⁷Ibid., p. 201.

⁸Ibid., p. 206, 191.

⁹Ibid., pp. 167, 202.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 175.

¹¹Ibid., p. 174.

¹²Aurora was played by actress Anne Meacham, who also appeared in a number of other Artists Theatre productions. In reviewing the production, the critic Richard Hayes observed, "The evening's bright particular star is Anne Meacham, an Aurora whose volatility and eerie prescience visibly suggest the world of uncommitted spirit which Mr. Merrill has so subtly embodied in the role." (Richard Hayes,

"The Stage: The Immortal Husband," The Commonwealth 60-61 (18 March 1955): 630.)

¹³The Immortal Husband, pp. 234, 183.

¹⁴The Immortal Husband, pp. 183-184.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 207.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 208.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 217.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 229, 225.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 217, 240.

²⁰*Wachiz*, pp. 88-89.

²¹The Immortal Husband, pp. 234-235.

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 205, 218.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 222.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 223.

²⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 171, 170.

²⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 240, 180.

²⁸Ibid., p. 179.

²⁹Ibid., p. 168.

³⁰Ibid., p. 186.

³¹Ibid., p. 182.

³²Ibid., p. 217.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Machiz, p. 89.

³⁵The Immortal Husband, p. 238.

³⁶Ibid., p. 237.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 171, 207.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 173, 196.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 181, 196.

⁴⁰As mentioned in the introduction, very little information is available regarding specific Artists Theatre productions. This is especially true of The Ticklish Acrobat. Therefore, the following analysis will focus on the play rather than the production.

⁴¹Richard Hayes, "The Stage: The Artists Theatre," The Commonweal (23 April 1954): 68.

⁴²The following remark about Pomo by Herbert Machiz may give us some indication of how he directed the play. In

"The Challenge of a Poetic Theatre," he states, "The town is full of expatriates and natives, all behaving like the Marx brothers." (Machiz, p.88)

⁴³Robert Hivnor, The Ticklish Acrobat in Playbook: Five Plays for a New Theatre, vol. 1. (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1956), p. 68.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 61.

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 26.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 97.

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 27, 40.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 51.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 94.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 122.

⁵¹Interview with Robert Hivnor, New York City, 7 November 1987.

⁵²The Ticklish Acrobat, p. 52.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 81.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 33.

⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 36-37.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 49.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 99.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 69.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 80.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 56.

⁶²Ibid., p. 79.

⁶³Ibid., pp. 79, 83, 80.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 82.

⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 113, 115.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 23.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 35.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 29.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 31.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 35.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 33.

⁷²Ibid., pp. 33, 41.

⁷³Ibid., p. 43.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 67.

⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 71, 70.

⁷⁶Ibid., pp. 72, 74.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 76.

⁷⁸Ibid., pp. 73, 74.

⁷⁹Ibid., pp. 106, 105.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 68.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 99.

⁸²Ibid., p. 70.

⁸³Herbert Machiz directed Baba (Carolyn Brenner) to "deliver the tirade as a total recall for each needed moment. With every line and gesture, she showed her personal decline as a human being in the impersonal service of art, and the speech took on the double meaning of both an individual and aesthetic past." (Machiz, p. 88.)

⁸⁴The Ticklish Acrobat, pp. 62-63.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 121.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 120.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 126.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 127.

When the Artists Theatre began in 1953, Off-Broadway was undergoing a post-war renaissance. Although production had come to a virtual halt during World War II, peace brought with it a resurgence of interest and activity. As Howard Greenberger observes in The Off-Broadway Experience:

The greatest phase for OB began almost immediately after the war. To remedy the lack of opportunity in the established theater, returning veterans took matters into their own hands and set¹ up nearly three hundred theaters within three years.

During this "Golden Era," Off-Broadway acquired its generalized name and grew not only in size but stature. In 1949, Equity, for the first time, gave its members the opportunity to perform in Off-Broadway theatres. Although these actors often worked for little more than the token salary of five dollars a week, they brought a new level of professionalism to the New York stage beyond Broadway.

As time progressed, Off-Broadway was increasingly seen as less of a cultural stepchild and more of an independent entity "that was no longer to be measured against the commercial colossus."² Off-Broadway could not hope to compete with Broadway in revenue or audience but it could offer an alternative to the mainstream theatre, which, in the postwar period, was dominated by comedies, musicals and other "sure things" that were intended to insure producers a return on their investments.

Nevertheless, most Off-Broadway theatres of the Fifties were unwilling to take a chance on new American dramatists. Part of the problem was economic: costs may have been lower Off-Broadway, but even a modest investment might threaten a struggling company. Therefore, many theatres settled for "safe," if not virtually guaranteed, revivals of the classics or brought popular European plays to the American stage. These novelties (for the time) sometimes filled a gap and appealed to the downtown audiences of artists and intellectuals. Off-Broadway also provided a showcase for actors and, as the stakes got higher uptown, a number of Off-Broadway theatres began speculating on more commercial properties, with an eye toward moving them to Broadway.

As C.W.E. Bigsby points out, even the four principal Off-Broadway theatres (the Phoenix, the Circle in the Square, the New York Shakespeare Festival and the Living Theatre) did not "at first set themselves steadfastly to locate new American dramatists" (although the Living Theatre did produce poetic plays by Paul Goodman, William Carlos Williams and Ashbery). It was not until the late 1950's, when Off-Broadway production grew explosively, that these theatres became interested in discovering new plays and playwrights. By 1960, "the sheer volume of productions created a demand for plays by new writers."³

Back in 1953, however, the Artists Theatre stood almost alone in its determination to produce new American plays, particularly avant-garde poetic dramas by unknown authors. Although the Artists Theatre, like other Off-Broadway companies, took advantage of the Equity ruling to recruit professional actors such as Anne Meacham and Jack Cannon, its taste was decidedly non-commercial. Its verse dramas were "extremely unlikely" candidates for Broadway production.⁴

In many ways, the Artists Theatre was more like the later, more experimental Off-Off Broadway theatre of the Sixties than its conservative Fifties neighbors. For, "it was Off-Off Broadway which staged the verse dramas of Robert Lowell, John Ashbery, James Schevill, Kenneth Koch, James Merrill, Frank O'Hara and others, and it was Off-Off Broadway which opened its door to homosexual theatre and to a genuine aesthetic radicalism."⁵ In fact, it was not until the inception of Off-Off Broadway that many of the Artists Theatre poets would find another showcase for their unconventional work.

As the previous critical chapters have asserted, the Artists Theatre's plays are unapologetically poetic and experimental. Few are couched in the familiar trappings of realism and none are "kitchen sink" dramas designed to

mirror everyday life. Many, like The Ticklish Acrobat and Barbara Guest's fairytale-like The Lady's Choice involve elements of the fantastic while others, including Abel's Absalom and James Merrill's The Immortal Husband, explore myth and philosophy. The Artists Theatre also experimented with dada-like, multi-media plays such as James Schuyler's Presenting Jane (which incorporated film) and with surrealistic dramas such as The Heroes and Try! Try!.

The Artists Theatre also resembles the American theatre of the Sixties in its recruitment of non-theatre artists. Off- and Off-Off Broadway, particularly in the late sixties, "frequently involved non-professional actors and directors, and writers who were painters, sculptors and dancers."⁶ Although Machiz and his actors were "theatre people," the majority of Artists Theatre writers and designers crossed over from other fields such as poetry and painting. Although this seemed natural to most of them because of the cohesive, artistic community in which they lived and worked, it was not typical of the American theatre until the 1960's (and, even then, happened only on the fringes of the non-commercial theatre).

Unlike the later Off-Off Broadway crossover artists, these poets and painters did not generally have, or even aim for, the intense collaborative experience sought in the

Sixties. They accepted the theatre's traditional division of labor. The painters designed, the poets wrote, and neither invaded the director's territory, owing partly to their own inexperience and partly to Machiz's temperament and authoritarian style of directing. Nor did they try to create new types of theatrical forms such as Happenings. As seems logical in a company dedicated to promoting poetic drama, the Artists Theatre was not, like many later theatre movements, anti-literary. Its scripts were inviolate; they provided the foundation and inspiration for its productions.

Despite the high level and variety of poetic drama it inspired, the Artists Theatre received, and has continued to receive, little recognition. Its productions were seen and appreciated by a small audience and a very few critics. In addition, it did not last long enough or have a high enough profile for scholars to make the connection between its work and that of later theatres.

Its critical neglect might also be attributed to its choice of material and its self-proclaimed status as a poetic theatre. As Katharine Worth points out, the dramatic work of America's poets has historically remained isolated from the rest of American drama. Poetic drama tends to be regarded in a separate category and is assessed by different standards, partly because of the circumstances under which

it is produced. "The American poets have had to depend upon the enterprise of the coterie theatre and, in so doing, to accept its limitations, not least of which is the special attitude it generates in audiences, actors and reviewers." ⁷ Even when a play is overwhelmingly successful with critics and audiences (as was Robert Mivnor's The Ticklish Acrobat), its success is still regarded as "special" and not fully valid outside of the coterie theatre.⁸

The theatre's lack of recognition might also be traced to some deficiency in the direction of the plays. Although there are too few records to assess the quality of Machiz's work, most poets, in retrospect, have voiced doubt about whether Machiz was truly the man for the job. According to them, his sensibilities ran more toward mainstream theatre, and his approach was more conventional than that required by these experimental dramas. (In turn, Machiz criticized the plays for being somewhat static and non-theatrical.)

We might also assume, from the accounts of the painters, that the productions suffered from a lack of funding. Although the company's talent pool was impressive, even the best visual artists had to be limited by design budgets of twenty-five dollars and under.

Luckily, the theatre's lack of formal recognition did not totally inhibit the preservation of its work. Although most of the set designs are lost, a number of the plays have been published and even revived. Robert Hivnor's The Ticklish Acrobat, for example, has been done in both Europe and the United States. (It was revived once by Machiz and once by Jules Irving and Herbert Blau's Actors Theatre of San Francisco.) The Heroes was revived by New York's Eye and Ear Theatre, and James Merrill's The Immortal Husband was done again by Machiz in Dublin.

In addition, a number of the poets and painters whom John Myers introduced to the theatre have continued to work, albeit sporadically, in the medium. Kenneth Koch and Alfred Leslie have been among the most active of the original Artists Theatre group although others have, with the right temptations, been coaxed back into the theatre. Jane Freilicher, for example, designed the revival of The Heroes, and Barbara Guest participated in a 1960's attempt (by a new group) to create an artists theatre.

No matter how interested they became in the theatrical process, however, all of the poets and painters of the Artists Theatre eventually gravitated back to their first love. Time, they found, was too short to venture too far outside their chosen medium for long. Nevertheless, we have

to assume that their experience in the theatre had some impact upon their work. As some of the painters have mentioned, designing sets demanded a new sense of scale. It gave them a chance to create a temporary, versus a permanent, visual environment and to watch actors interact with their work.

For the poets, the Artists Theatre was a chance to turn their poetry into dialogue and to "hear" their words chanted by a new choir of voices. They also had the bittersweet experience of watching others interpret their work and of seeing a director substitute his vision for their own. Finally, the Artists Theatre gave them a chance to confront their hitherto mainly invisible audience and to learn the difference between what works on the page and what works on the stage.

Notes to Conclusion

¹Howard Greenberger, The Off-Broadway Experience (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 10-11.

²Ibid., p. 11.

³C.W.E. Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, vol. 3: Beyond Broadway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 24.

⁴Ibid., p. 22.

⁵Ibid., p. 26.

⁶Ibid., p. 24.

⁷Worth, Katharine J. "The Poets in the American Theatre," American Theatre, ed. by Brown, John Russell and Harris, Bernard, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies, no. 10. (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1967; reprint ed., New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), p. 88.

⁸Worth adds: "The poets' dependence on the coterie theatre, perpetuating as it does the distinction between 'poet' and 'playwright' which has bedevilled the twentieth-century theatre, involves them in a vicious circle. They are cut off from popular audiences who suspect 'poetic drama' when presented as such, though they may be prepared to respond to 'poetry of the theatre' when it seems to occur as an accidental by-product" (American Theatre, p. 88).

Appendix A

PRODUCTIONS OF THE ARTISTS THEATRE:

FIRST SEASON (1953)

PROGRAM 1: February 25, 1953

Theatre de Lys, 121 Christopher St., NY, NY.

Auto-Da-Fé by Tennessee Williams

Director: Herbert Machiz

Set Design: Robert Soule

Try! Try! by Frank O'Hara

Director: Herbert Machiz

Set Design: Larry Rivers

Music: John LaTouche

Lighting: Mildred Jackson

Presenting Jane by James Schuyler

Director: Herbert Machiz

Set Design: Elaine de Kooning

Little Red Riding Hood by Kenneth Koch.

Director: Herbert Machiz

Set Design: Grace Hartigan

PROGRAM 2: April 29, 1953

Finch College Theatre, 52 E. 78th St., NY, NY.

The Screen by Parker Tyler

Director: Herbert Machiz

Set Design: Alfred Leslie,

PROGRAM 3: May 18, 1953

The Comedy Club, 150 E. 38th St., NY, NY.

The Heroes by John Ashbery

Director: Herbert Machiz

Set Design: Nell Blaine

Music: Eli Yordan

The Lady's Choice by Barbara Guest

Director: Herbert Machiz

Set Design: Jane Freilicher

Music: Edi Franceschini

The Bait by James Merrill

Director: Herbert Machiz

Set Design: Albert Kresch

Music: Ben Westbrook

PRODUCTIONS OF THE ARTISTS THEATRE:

SECOND SEASON (1953-54)

PROGRAM 1: November 3, 1953

Amato Opera Theatre, 159 Bleecker St., NY, NY.

The Death of Odysseus by Lionel Abel

Director: Herbert Machiz

Set Design: Alfred Leslie

Costumes: Bernard Oshei

Lighting: Mildred Jackson

The Love of Don Perlimplin and Belisa in the Garden by
García Lorca

Translated by James Graham-Lujan
and Richard L. O'Connell.

Director: Herbert Machiz

Set Design: Alfred Leslie

Music: Billy Strayhorn

Costumes: Bernard Oshei

Lighting: Mildred Jackson

PROGRAM 2: January 26, 1954

Amato Opera Theatre, 159 Bleecker St., NY, NY.

Fire Exit by V. R. Lang

Director: Herbert Machiz

Set Design: Robert Soule

Music: John Gruen

PROGRAM 3: March 8, 1954

Amato Opera House, 159 Bleecker St., NY, NY.

The Ticklish Acrobat by Robert Hivnor

Director: Herbert Machiz

Set Design: Julian Beck

Music: Sara Cunningham

Costumes: Bernard Oshei

PRODUCTIONS OF THE ARTISTS THEATRE:

THIRD SEASON (1955)

Date: February 14, 1955

Theatre de Lys, 121 Christopher St., NY, NY.

The Immortal Husband by James Merrill

Director: Herbert Machiz

Set Design and Costumes: Richard V. Hare

Lighting - Peggy Clark

FOURTH SEASON (1956)

Date: May 16, 1956

Harlequin Theatre, 122 Second Ave., NY, NY.

Absalom by Lionel Abel

Director: Herbert Machiz

Set Design: Robert Fletcher

Costumes: Robert Fletcher

Music: John Gruen and Teijo Ito

Appendix B: Playbills, brochures and set design

THE ARTISTS THEATRE

in association with

JOHN BERNARD MYERS

presents

JAMES MERRILL'S

new comedy

"The Immortal Husband"

• • •

The entire production under the direction of

HERBERT MACHIZ

• • •

Sets and Costumes by RICHARD V. HARE

Lighting by PEGGY CLARK

*"The Immortal Husband" tells the ancient story of how
Tithonus was granted eternal life by Aurora, goddess of
the dawn — who neglected, however, to give him eternal
youth*

• • •

Limited Engagement

Beginning Monday Evening, February 14, 1955

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

• • •

ACT I

A drawing room in England, 1854.

ACT II

A mountainside in Russia, 1894.

ACT III

A country house in America, 1954.

• • •

CREDITS

*Costumes by Manhattan Costume Co., Inc.**Miss Meacham's coiffure by Helena Rubinstein**Miss Meacham's Dress in Act III by Rosette Pennington.**Furniture, Newell Art Galleries.**Properties by Nelson's Folly**Photos by Alix Jeffry*

• • •

S T A F F

Company Manager	Marian Graham
Press Representative	Max Eisen
Stage Manager	Gene Perlwin
Box Office Treasurer	Harry Snowden
Master Carpenter	Frank Brownlow
Master Electrician	Robert Schwaegerle
Property Man	Sam Pernick
Wardrobe	Royce Powell
Assistant to Producer	David Jackson
Production Assistant	Frank Dana

WHO'S WHO IN THE CAST

• • •

MARY GRACE CANFIELD'S (*Maid, Fanya, and Enid*) bright career in theater began after 4 years study with Jasper Deeter at the Hedgerow Theater. Her first professional appearance was with Charles Laughton in the N. Y. production of 'Galileo.' In 1952, she was in 'The Grey-eyed People' and in 1953 she had critical acclaim for her 'Alice' in 'The Frogs of Spring.' She has done 9 seasons of stock in Surry and Bar Harbor, Me., and in Lakewood Playhouse in Barnesville, Pa. Miss Canfield repeated her role in 'Frogs of Spring' on Studio One, on TV, with Peter Lind Hayes and Mary Healy. She has also had featured parts on Philco Playhouse, *Mama*, and *Mr. Peepers*.

JEAN ELLYN (*Mrs. Mallow, Olga, Nurse*), a native New Yorker, returns to the stage after many years during which she has worked steadily on all major radio and TV programs. Beginning as a student of Shakespeare, with Emma Sheridan Frye, and making her first stage appearance with Theatre Guild, Miss Ellyn has found herself on such 'whodunits' as *Mr. District Attorney*, *Gang Busters*, *Counter-Spy*, *Big Story*, *Official Detective* and, in the movie, *C-Man*, as well as many other radio and TV programs. Miss Ellyn lived in Italy a year broadcasting and dubbing in Italian films. She was in the Broadway production of *Having Wonderful Time* and a member of the New Stages Co.

ANNE MEACHAM (*Aurora*) was the 1953 winner of the Clarence Derwent Award for her performance in 'The Long Watch.' Last season, Miss Meacham appeared in the great success, 'Ondine.' She has just returned, from the Arena Stages, in Washington, where she played Lorna in 'Golden Boy.' In the world premiere by the Artists Theater of Archibald MacLeish's 'Trojan Horse', Miss Meacham created the role of Helen of Troy. Another outstanding performance was as Laura, in 'The Glass Menagerie' which she did for the Equity Library Theater. Touring with Jane Cowl in 'The First Mrs. Fraser' and then with Ina Claire in 'The Fatal Weakness,' she has still found time to study for two seasons at the Neighborhood Playhouse, play in two Artists Theater productions and make TV appearances with Kraft, U. S. Steel's Theater Guild and other programs.

SCOTT MERRILL (*Gardener, Konstantin, Mark*) creates his first dramatic role in 'The Immortal Husband' although he is known to Theatre de Lys audiences for his portrayal of MacHeath in '3 Penny Opera' for which performance he won the Daniel Blum Award, 1954. He has won popular and critical applause for his performances in at least eight Broadway musicals, among which were 'Lady in the Dark,' 'Pal Joey,' 'Paint Your Wagon,' 'Guys and Dolls.' Mr. Merrill appeared in three dramatic productions of the Lakeside Summer Theatre, Lake Hopatcong, N. J., last summer.

WHO'S WHO IN THE CAST: (Continued)

• • •

FREDERICK ROLF (*Laomedon, Memnon*) was last seen at the Phoenix Theatre in 'Coriolanus' with Robert Ryan. Prior to that he was in the Walter Chrysler production of 'The Strong are Lonely' at the Broadhurst. Mr. Rolf made his Broadway debut, at the age of 25, playing the aged Inquisitor in the Theater Guild production of Shaw's 'St. Joan' starring Uta Hagen. He has toured the country (for two years) with the Margaret Webster Shakespeare Company and with Eva LaGalienne in 'Scenes from Great Plays.' Besides his regular appearance on 'You Are There,' Mr. Rolf has been seen on most of the major dramatic TV programs.

WILLIAM SHEIDY (*Tithonus*) is making his second appearance on a New York stage in 'The Immortal Husband'—his first being in the Equity Library Theater production of 'The Sabine Women.' His experience has been mostly in the night club field, as straight man in the popular 'Fletcher and Sheidy' act at Le Ruban Bleu, The Blue Angel, Number One 5th Avenue, and others across country. In the interims he has appeared in summer stock, Aline MacMahon's West Coast production of 'Madwoman of Chailot,' as well as with Imogene Coca in 'Happy Birthday' and Mae West's 'Come on Up; Ring Twice.' Mr. Sheidy has made two motion pictures: 'Up Front' for Universal, and 'Fixed Bayonet.'

THE AUTHOR

Born in New York in 1926, **JAMES MERRILL** has gained a reputation as one of America's leading young poets. He has appeared widely in literary magazines, published two collections of verse, and received several important prizes. His first play, 'The Bail' was performed by the Artists Theater, in 1953.

HERBERT MACHIZ (*director*) after three years in Europe on the first U. S. State Dep't. Fulbright Fellowship, where he worked as an assistant director for Orson Welles production of 'Dr. Faustus,' in Paris, returned to the U.S.A. to direct Tennessee Williams' 'Glass Menagerie,' for the Equity Library Theatre, in 1952. Since that time he has staged 13 original plays by contemporary writers for the Artists Theatre and a revival production of the musical, 'Cabin In The Sky,' starring Juanita Hall. For Michael Ellis, he directed Edward Everett Horton, Vicki Cummings, and John Dall in 'The Man Who Came To Dinner.' Mr. Machiz operates the Lakeside Summer Theatre, Lake Hopatcong, N. J. and, in winter, teaches acting at The Artists Theatre School.

Theater de Lys

121 CHRISTOPHER STREET

NEW YORK 14, NEW YORK • WA 4-8782

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Thoughtless persons annoy patrons and distract actors and endanger the safety of others by lighting matches during the performance and intermissions. This violates a city ordinance and renders the offenders liable to ARREST. It is urged that all patrons refrain from lighting matches in the auditorium of this theatre.

Beginning Monday Evening, February 14, 1955

Matinees Saturday and Sunday

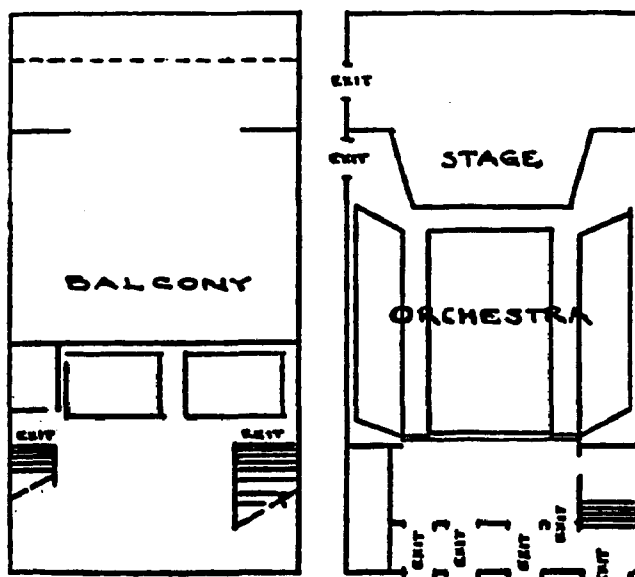
IN THE EVENT OF AN AIR RAID ALARM REMAIN IN YOUR SEATS AND OBEY THE INSTRUCTIONS OF THE MANAGEMENT.—HERBERT R. O'BRIEN, Director of Civil Defense.

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Ladies are requested to remove their hats.



EXHIBITING:

Nell Blaine
 Helen Frankenthaler
 Jane Freilicher
 Robert Goodnough
 Grace Hartigan
 Harry Jackson
 Alfred Leslie
 Fairfield Porter
 Dwight Rioley
 Larry Rivers

PUBLISHERS OF:

An Elegy
 by Chester Kallman

 Turandot and Other Poems
 by John Ashbery

 Poems
 by Kenneth Koch

 A City Winter
 by Frank O'Hara

 Semi-Colon
 a literary News Letter
 edited by John Bernard Myers
 with contributions from
 W. H. Auden, Saul Bellow, Wallace Fowle, Parker Tyler,
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PRESENTS

THE ARTISTS THEATRE

11th PRODUCTION

THE TICKLISH ACROBAT

A NEW COMEDY

BY

ROBERT HIVNOR

DIRECTED BY HERBERT MACHIZ

SETTINGS BY JULIAN BECK



SOUCHE

CAST

in order of appearance

Ellie Sprocket PATRICIA RIPLEY
Gorjo PETER COURY
Brother Zugo FRANK DANA
Momma Zugo JENNIE LAWRENCE
Mme. Hurabi IRIS O'CONNOR
Uncle Henry IRWIN CHARONE
Beba CAROLYN BRENNER
Joe Zanelli TIGE ANDREWS
Battist Pratt JACK CANNON
Bomogrica JOSEPH BROWNSTONE
Anna Zugo JUNE HUNT
Dr. Suji WALTER GORNEY
Papa Zugo ROBERT RAYMOND

DIRECTED BY HERBERT MACHIZ

SETTINGS BY JULIAN BECK

COSTUMES BY BERNARD OSHEI

LIGHTING BY RICHARD JACKSON

MUSIC BY SARAH CUNNINGHAM

STAFF FOR "THE TICKLISH ACROBAT"*production stage manager* JOHN ROBERTSON*assistant stage manager* KITTIE HART

production crew KENNETH DIERCKS
 FORREST WOOD
 FRED SUMNER
 LEE STEVENS
 ELLEN CLARK
 EDWARD WASSAL

properties IRIS O'CONNOR*lighting executed by* LARRY FLORIO*assistant to Mr. Jackson* HESPER ANDERSON*publicity* CONDON REILLY**CREDITS***costumes from Manhattan Costume Co.***ACT 1**

SCENE 1. A public square. Somewhere in Eastern Europe.

SCENE 2. The same. Several days later.

*intermission***SYNOPSIS
OF
SCENES****ACT 2**

SCENE 1. A few days later.

SCENE 2. The third night of the festival.

*intermission***ACT 3**

SCENE 1. Two weeks later.

SCENE 2. The following morning.

OPENING MARCH 8

AMATO OPERA THEATRE, 159 BLEECKER STREET

THE FINAL PRODUCTION OF THE
SECOND SEASON

is

TITHONUS

A new play by James Merrill

Opening April 28

Announcing the second season

of

THE ARTISTS THEATRE

under the direction of HERBERT MACHIZ

PURPOSE

to produce new plays by talented writers and poets;
to give painters an opportunity to
collaborate with writers in making
fresh theatrical decor;
to experiment with new production methods;
to allow actors to work with unconventional scripts.

PROGRAM

NOVEMBER 3, 4, 5.

THE DEATH OF ODYSSEUS by Lionel Abel

A modern version of Sophocles' lost play. Decor by Alfred Leslie.

THE LOVE OF DON PERLIMPLIN AND BELISA IN THE GARDEN
by Garcia Lorca. With an all Negro cast. Decor by Alfred Leslie.

JANUARY 26, 27, 28.

FIRE EXIT by V. R. Lang.

A story of life in the burlesque theatre and a re-telling of the
myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Decor by Robert Soule.

Music by Billy Strayhorn.

MARCH 2, 3, 4.

ESCURIAL by Michel de Ghelderode.

"Theatre of violence" by a brilliant new Belgian writer
who has been much praised by the Parisian avant-garde.
Decor by George Hartigan.

THE HOUSE AT FALLING HANGING. A comedy by Frank O'Hara.
Decor by Larry Rivers.

A new play by Kenneth Koch. Designer to be announced.

APRIL 13, 14, 15.

TITHONUS by James Merrill.

A three act play in verse. Decor by Richard Hare.



PLACE

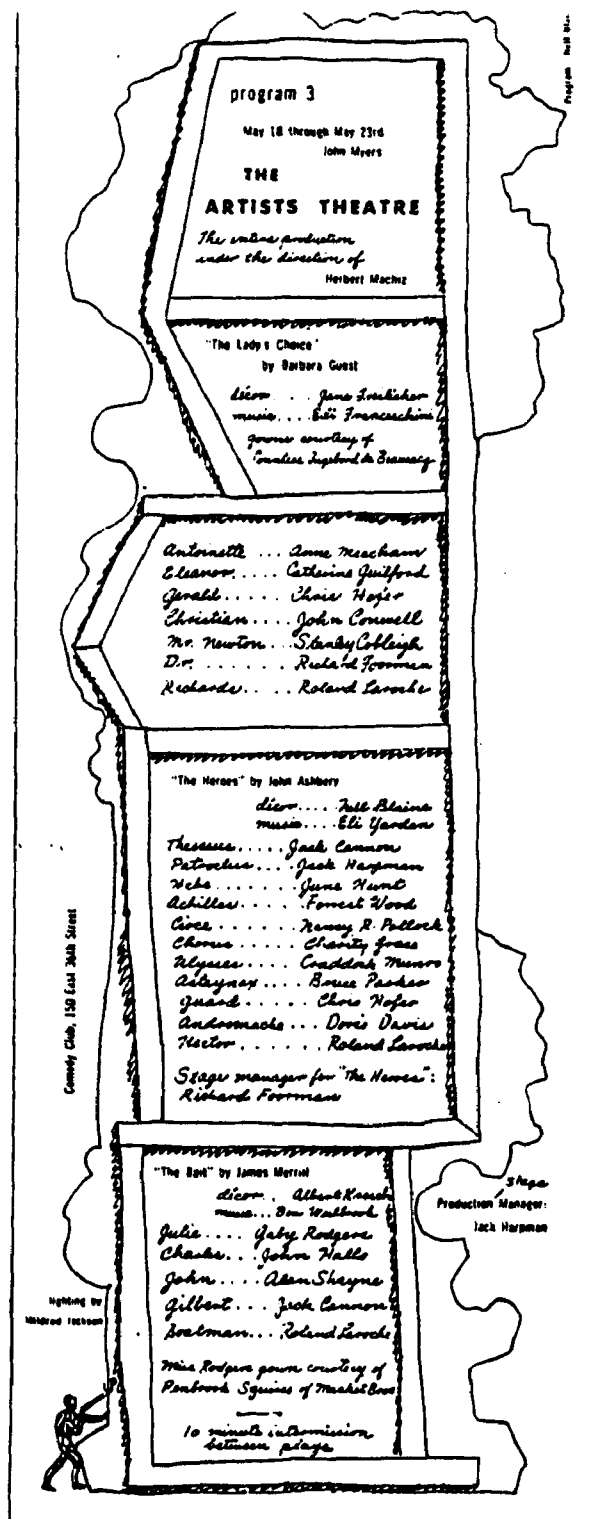
All plays will be presented at the Amato Opera Theatre,
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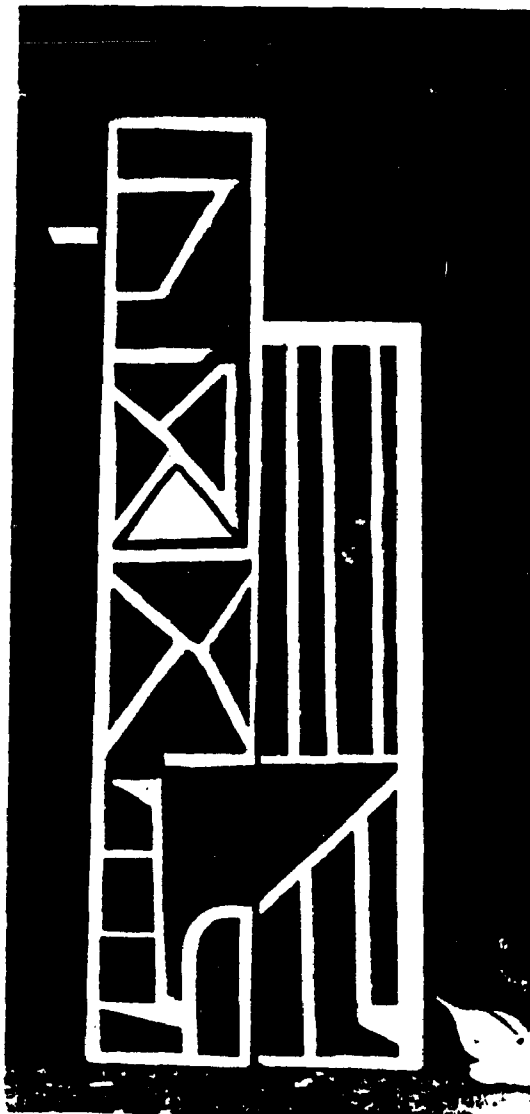
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Annual membership: \$7.50. This will permit one member to attend all programs.

THE
ARTISTS
THEATRE

Program
printed
on long
colored
strips



N B
screen - for
The Heroes by John Ashberry
at the Comedy Club, NYC



Courtesy of the artist, Nell Blaine.

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