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*Author:

"The Stanislavski System"

Since that time the basic policy has been changed. For the last two years we [the Guthrie] have received a lump sum from the OADR for the production of original works in our workshop. Thus the Minnesota Theatre Company (or whichever company receives the monies, as there have been several) in effect becomes the producer with the OADR functioning in an advisory capacity. It has worked admirably well these past two years.

**An Open Letter to
The Minnesota Theatre Company**

When you asked me for my play *Futz* and invited me to come and spend three weeks with you while you prepared the play for production in the Workshop at the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre, I was happy that you wanted to do my play, pleased that you wanted me to participate in its production, and grateful for it all, including (yes) the money. . . .

I want to say without qualification that most of the company's dedication and ability, their friendliness and helpfulness, will give me good memories for a long time to come. I want to say that the actors, actresses, and production staff with whom I worked are all wonderful at what they do. I want to say that Edward Payson Call, who took over my play in its last week of rehearsal, is a brilliant and imaginative director. I want to say all these things because I also have to say some things that I remember with bitterness. . . .

Perhaps all of the difficulty began with the assignment of a young and inexperienced director to my play because as a McKnight Fellow in Directing he was supposed to direct a play in the workshop. From what I

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could see very little else of significance was considered in the decision. Whether or not he really wanted to do Futz was beside the point. . . . Any question of artistic compatibility went right out the window, and both the McKnight Fellow and I suffered because of the bad judgment of other people. I am tempted to say very little judgment was used at all; I have the feeling we were put together because of an administrative formula. After two weeks of rehearsal, the end product was DISASTER. The production of my play was taking a shape I never had dreamed of and I was having less and less to say about it (which was certainly not why I was brought to Minneapolis) as the director became more and more autocratic. Possibly he was growing desperate; I certainly was. The upshot of all this was that the McKnight Fellow . . . not only retired from the production, he resigned from the company. And now my play was, in the eyes of some people, an agent of division in the company. The jitters were beginning to take hold.

Fortunately, Edward Payson Call, who I believe was more responsible than any other individual for me and my play being there in the first place, took over the direction. Under him things began to move and it appeared as if our problems were solved. But the administration couldn't shake its jitters, and there was some question as to whether or not the production would be scratched. . . . Edward had told me he was going to make a little speech before the play went on to explain to the audience that there had been a change in directorial approach, and thus the audience should regard the performance as a "work in progress" rather than as a completed pro-

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duction. That seemed fair enough at the moment, though I must say I felt the production was essentially finished: the absence of sets and special costumes was of little importance to me. So when Edward appeared on stage I didn't anticipate anything unexpected. But there was something unexpected, just about the worst thing that could happen to a playwright before the play is done, to a cast before they perform, to an audience before they see a play. After speaking to the point that I had been informed of, Edward apologized to the audience for the play, urging them to transcend any feelings of repulsion that they may have for the subject of the play by seeking to understand its metaphorical significance. It was an "experimental" play and they, the audience, were there to judge it, to tell us whether or not it makes it—that was the gist of it, and I don't think he believed a word of it. The speech may have humiliated me, but it was not I who was compromised. This self-incriminating little preface did not have the desired effect (to act as a shield for the "good name" of the company?). . . .

The show began; some of the audience did walk out after the first scene. We'll never know if the speech had anything to do with that. Those that did stay, and they were in the majority by far, were finally won over by the play, which means by all of it, the writing, the acting, and the direction. The *apologia* seems like a vague nightmare, but, like most bad dreams, hard to forget. . . .

As a playwright who has had the opportunity to work with you, I would like to admonish the administration, if I may, to see to it that in the future when a playwright is invited to your

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workshop, he or she can concentrate on working on the play untroubled by feelings that you have misgivings about what you have chosen to do in the service of American drama.

Rochelle Owens

In reply:

Dear Rochelle,

...I sometimes wonder if you wouldn't have been a great deal happier if the production *had* been cancelled; then you could have made a frontal attack on the craven and cowardly policies of the Minnesota Theatre Company and if denied the sound of rather enthusiastic applause that greeted the end of your play, you could have reveled in the great yawp of tongue clucking that would no doubt have resounded throughout the theatrical community.

However, be that as it may, in your letter you give voice to two main grievances—the choice of the original director for your play and my fulsome little speech before its performance. In both cases I think your complaints are quite justified and as director of the workshop program at the Guthrie Theatre it is I who must apologize for two sizable blunders. The fact that I have done so already to you personally is of little moment here. . . .

As far as the director is concerned, I chose someone who had shown considerable interest in your work, someone who, by virtue of his experience, I felt could be of great value to you in mounting a production of your play.

... What should have happened (and would have happened had it not been for time pressures) was to have you and the director meet before any commitment had been made on either side.

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