

PAUL SHENAR

Early in the 1980's, I received a telephone call from Ed Hastings. He was now artistic director of the American Conservator Theater in San Francisco. "I'm sending you a present," he said.

When I asked him what it was, he said that Paul Shenar was planning to travel from Los Angeles to New York for a visit. He indicated that Paul would like to stay at my apartment.

I couldn't believe my ears. I had met Paul Shenar several years before when he was a young man, and I thought at the time that he was one of the most handsome people I had ever seen. He had gone on to become one of the leading actors at the American Conservatory Theatre. After he had left that company, he became a respected featured player in movies. His biggest success was as the Cuban drug dealer in Scarface, playing opposite Al Pacino and Michelle Pfeiffer. He also had made a small fortune doing the voice-overs for Oil of Olay commercials. The idea of him coming to stay in my apartment was unbelievable to me.

I often wonder what my life would have been if Paul had not arrived at this moment. He proved to be one of the kindest, most generous persons I have ever known. After the failure of Lydie Breeze, I was afraid that I would have to give up my apartment because I could no longer afford it. Paul offered to split the rent with me if he could use it as a place to stay whenever he came to New York from Los Angeles.

In 1984, the Whitney Museum put up a show of Fairfield Porter's paintings. After seeing the exhibit, I wanted to see for myself Great Spruce Head, the island in Maine where Porter had lived in the summertime and where he had done a great many of his paintings. I contacted a friend who had a house near Spruce Head and made a plan to visit. One bright and sunny summer's day, my friend and I sailed through the Eggemoggin Reach, joyously bound, we thought, for Fairfield Porter's island. We must have veered from our course, because we wound up at Pulpit Harbor North Haven. When I stepped foot on the island, I knew at once that I was going to live there.

So certain was I of this that I immediately made reservations at the Pulpit Harbor Inn to return over Labor Day so that I could look for my house. The Pulpit Harbor Inn was run by Christie and Barney Hallowell. At the time Barney was also a teacher in the North Haven Community School.

I knew exactly the house I wanted. In my mind's eye I saw a little white New England cape beside the water. When I returned, I looked all over North Haven for such a house. It was impossible for me to imagine why I couldn't find it. On the last day of my visit, the real estate agent with whom I was dealing asked if I would like to look on the neighboring island of Vinalhaven. I protested that I had heard Vinalhaven was not as nice as North Haven, but I went anyhow. The second house we looked at was the one for me. It stood on sixty acres of ground, and it had a beautiful old ruined orchard. I agreed to buy it immediately.

Just how I thought I was going to finance this Maine adventure was not clear. I had absolutely no money. But Paul Shenar, whose credit was far better than mine, agreed to loan me the down

payment, and the deal was made. I took possession of the house in May 1985, and I moved in for the summer shortly thereafter.

The house was in wretched shape. It had not been lived in for seven years. There was no indoor plumbing or wiring. The plaster was falling from the ceilings and walls. My deal with Paul was that after the initial down payment, I would be financially responsible for the payments on the mortgage and repairs. I felt I could do most of the work myself, so, as soon as I moved in, I set about my labors in earnest. I put in plumbing and electricity. I had a central chimney built. I tore out the old plaster and re-plastered the entire house by myself.

I also started to paint again. I had not once touched brush to paper during the ten years I was producing on Broadway, except to do an occasional set design. I had to teach myself all over again. True to form I began painting the trees and branches of trees in my orchard. I began working in watercolors, but I eventually moved on to acrylics. Once again I had no trouble selling my work, but then again, I also didn't set the prices very high.

During the fall and winter, I was still in charge of all the productions for NYU's undergraduate drama department, as well as running the Playwrights Horizons Theatre School. Clearly I was overworked. Shortly before the end of my third year, I collapsed.

I had gone to Washington to see a production of Women and Water, the latest play in John Guare's trilogy that had begun with Lydie Breeze. During the performance I developed a splitting headache, and by the time it was over I was having difficulty breathing. They took me to the emergency room of a Washington hospital, gave me sedatives to calm me down, and eventually released me. I flew back to New York City the next morning.

But I was frightened. It was obvious that I could not go on at the pace I was setting for myself. I told Evangeline Morphos that I would have to resign my duties as producer for the NYU undergraduate drama department, but I planned to stay on as head of the Playwrights Horizons Theatre

School.

After that I really didn't have much to do. By now the theatre school was firmly established, and the management details were left to Helen Cook. Once again I had maneuvered my way into a job where I could read newspapers and magazines all day long and go out for extended lunches. I was bored. True, during these years at Playwrights Horizons I did manage to mount a production of The Ghost Sonata. And, in partnership with Julia Miles of The Women's Project and Edgar Lansbury, I also did a workshop production of Willa Cather's O Pioneers! This led to a further workshop production by the Seattle Rep and then a full production at the Huntington Theatre in Boston. The Boston production was filmed for American Playhouse on PBS and shown nationwide to good reviews. But that production never made it to New York.

Paul Daniels, the managing director of Playwrights Horizons, was dissatisfied with me. My indifference to my job and my long absences during the summer months infuriated him, and he wanted me fired. I gave him the tools to do so when, with the Shubert Organization and Edgar Lansbury, I produced a workshop of a rap musical called Club XII. The musical, based on Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, was by Randy Weiner and Rob Hanning. Randy was a student of mine in the professional program of the Playwrights Horizons Theater School and a part-time assistant. Paul Daniels maintained that, by producing a work by a student, I had threatened Playwrights Horizon's nonprofit status. The argument struck me as nonsense, but it was as good a reason as any to get rid of me. By that time I wanted to go.

The workshop production of Club XII seemed a sure success. Seven motion picture companies were bidding for the rights. But the lawyers delayed the contracts so long that Bernie Jacobs, the head of the Shubert Organization, lost interest. At first this did seem a total loss, because at the time Quincy Jones was still interested. I flew to California along with Randy Weiner and Rob Hanning to meet with him. However, even though Edgar Lansbury, the Shubert Organization, and I agreed to cede our rights

to Quincy Jones so that he could produce the show on his own, nothing ever came of the deal.

I made one last feeble attempt to produce a commercially visible show. Using material and several of the former student performers from the NYU production of Tinned Lettuce, I put together a new Edward Gorey musical review. It was to be called Amphigorey after his series of books with that title. It was again directed by Dan Levans. The show was developed in workshops at Bennington College and in New York. After that it was mounted in full production at the American Musical Theater Festival in Philadelphia, and then at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge. Paxton Whitehead played the leading role of Mr. Earbrass there, and as usual, he was brilliant. But, for all its charms, Amphigorey was just not commercial. After a couple of years trying to raise money for a New York production, I had had it. I decided that my career in the theatre was over, and I planned to move to the house in Maine.

I always felt that no matter what happened to me, I would have Paul Shenar to rely on financially. Around the time that I gave up my job as producer for NYU's undergraduate drama department, he was negotiating to buy the apartment on Charlton Street. The contracts were drawn up and ready to be signed by Christmas, when Paul suddenly announced that he was not going through with the deal. He said he was leaving for California in five days, and that I should pack up his belongings and send them on to him.

I didn't know what happened. If I wanted to avoid paying any more rent, I also had to be out of the apartment in five days. I rented a succession of sublets until I finally found a small apartment at a rent I could afford on 14th Street.

Paul came back to New York about a month after his departure. He said he felt he owed me an explanation. He had left so abruptly, he said, because he had just found out he had AIDS, and he didn't know how to handle the news. I regretted he had not felt close enough to me to tell me. I also

regretted that he had not stayed in New York to let me take care of him.

I never fully understood Paul or what he expected of me. One Easter he came to New York. We had lunch with André Bishop at a restaurant in Chelsea. After the meal we were all in a taxicab going downtown when Paul proudly announced that he and I had handled our relationship well. I didn't know what he was talking about. Paul and I had never been sexually intimate. So far as I was aware, we had no relationship at all except as two people who shared an apartment and owned a house together. In spite of my ever increasing financial dependence on Paul, I never felt especially close to him. I was always slightly afraid of him.

I saw Paul only occasionally after that, in New York or at the farm in Maine. At my sixtieth birthday party, in May 1988, the effects of the disease were already taking their toll on him. He kept up a brave front, going so far as appearing in a Broadway production of Macbeth with Glenda Jackson and Christopher Plummer. But the last time I saw him in Maine, during the summer of 1989, he was desperately sick. This once beautiful man was a wraith of his former self.

Paul died in October of that year. He left me the house. He had asked that he be buried in the orchard, so I made arrangements to meet two young men who brought his ashes east. When I got to the house in Maine, I found a message from Paul. Evidently he had called me just before he died. He wanted to tell me that he was in unbearable pain and that he would die that afternoon. He told me not to grieve. He said that he did not fear death and that he was at peace with himself. This message was scrawled in pencil on a wooden shingle and left on my kitchen table. It had obviously been written down by a carpenter who was working in my house at the time. Because Paul knew so precisely when he was going to die, I have always wondered if he did not take his own life.

When Paul's ashes arrived, we had a gathering of friends at the house. I read a speech from The Tempest in which Prospero bids farewell to his island – Paul had hoped against hope that he would be strong enough to do a production of the show in New York. After that I took his ashes and spread them

in the orchard. It rained during the night and the next morning when I walked out into my yard, I could not find trace of them.

During my time in New York, I had produced on enormous financial and critical success. It was a pleasure to stand in the back of the Martin Beck Theater at the performance of Dracula and know that the 1,300 people in the audience were there because of a whim of mine. However, I certainly did not want to be remembered solely as the producer of Dracula. I had done plays to which I was far more deeply committed, and I had watched in agony as each one had gone down in failure. And the thing that never stopped gnawing away at me was the harm I had done to my own play. I was like a gambler down on his luck. I was convinced that with my next play I would recoup my losses, but that never happened. I kept raising my bets until reached a point where there was nothing left to bet. Whatever emotional capital I once possessed had been spent.

I suffered similar doubts about my abilities as a painter. Because by this time I had come to rely so heavily on the use of photographs in my work, I felt that I was engaged in some sort of deception.

One night I met David Halberstam and his then-wife, the Polish film actress Elzbieta Chezevska, as I was walking along Central Park West. I knew them both from Nantucket. They had just been to the wake of a friend of theirs, and I asked what was the cause of their friend's death.

David always did have a knack for going for the jugular. "He died of copying photographs and turning them into paintings," he said.

His words stung. Because of my own insecurities about my work, I was inclined to share his obviously low opinion of it.

My first Social Security check came through in April 1992. It was for quite a sizable amount, and with this money, I made my move to Maine. I had put a couple of heaters in the house, so it was

comfortable enough. A friend in New York, William Beadleston, offered to bail me out whenever the going got rough. But clearly this largess was not going to last forever. I had to figure out some way to support myself.

I decided to do a series of full-length portraits in the manner of Sargent. I hoped that when these were completed they might lead to other commissioned work. Before I left New York, I asked several people to pose for photographs so that I might work from these when I got to Maine. They were all doing me a favor. None of them were under any obligation to buy the completed paintings.

When my first model saw his portrait, he said that the legs looked too short, and, although he was in a position to buy it, he declined to do so. My second model was Kevin McDermott, a former student of mine from NYU. I gave him his painting. The portrait of my third model, Elzbieta Chezevska in a bright red ball gown, now hangs in Andre Bishop's office at Lincoln Center, also as a gift from me. It is called *The Red Dress*. By that time Elzbieta and David Halberstam had divorced. When she saw my painting, she called me on the telephone in tears. "How could you do this to me?" she wailed. "I thought you were my friend."

My fourth portrait was a real commission. At the end of my first summer as a full-time resident of Maine, Frank Langell, with his wife and two adopted children in tow, came to visit me in Vinalhaven. There was some talk of a revival of Dracula, and it seemed serious enough that we felt we should discuss it. Frank saw my portrait of Kevin McDermott and was impressed by it. One day when we were out driving, with me in the front seat next to him and the two children in the back, Frank turned to me and said, "How would you like to do a portrait of my kids?" But then, before I even had a chance to reply, he changed his mind. "Hell, I don't want a portrait of the kids," he said. "I want a portrait of me."

I knew we were on shaky ground. Frank was no longer the slim young man he was when he originally played Dracula. Over the years he had grown bloated and bald. But, as usual, I needed the

money. I explained that because I worked from photographs, if I did a portrait of him, it would look exactly as he looked now. "What's wrong with that?" he said. "I like my looks."

We made a deal for me to paint a full-length, standing portrait of him. He would pay me a certain amount in advance and the rest upon completion. We met in New York in the fall to take photographs from which I would work. We went over them with extreme care, and he selected the ones he felt were suitable. When I returned to Vinalhaven, I set to work at once. I got worried, however, when midway through the process, Frank gave me two photographs of himself as a younger man which he felt revealed his true soul.

Nevertheless, when I completed the portrait, I sent it off to New York with high hopes. It was not an attractive likeness, but it was most definitely Frank. Along the way the man who was transporting the painting stopped off in Portland to show it to Thomas Crotty, the manager of the Frost Gully Gallery. Tom had earlier agreed to take me on as a client. I was encouraged by the fact that Tom was impressed with the painting, but I should have known what was going to happen. When Frank called with his reaction to the portrait, he seemed on the verge of tears.

"I absolutely hate it," he said. "You must dislike me very much to have done such a thing."

I felt terrible. I told him that I would return his advance and would take the painting back. "Wait a minute," he said. "Perhaps I should study it more carefully." He then asked permission to have it moved from the gallery where he had seen it to his hotel room. Given his reaction to the painting, I did not think that was such a good idea, and I told him so.

"Oh come on, John," he said. "We're all honorable men."

I gave in. The next morning he had the painting moved from the gallery to his hotel room. After that I didn't hear from him for two weeks. When I finally called him, I repeated my offer to return his advance. All he had to do was send the painting back to me. "I'm afraid that's impossible," he said. "The painting has been destroyed."

“What?” I exclaimed, unable to believe my own ears. “What happened?”

“Oh, I sent it to California for safekeeping,” he said. “It was destroyed in an earthquake.”

What sort of fool did he take me for? I said that even if the painting had been destroyed in an earthquake, it couldn't have dematerialized. If he would just send me some scrap, some shred of it, I would return his advance.

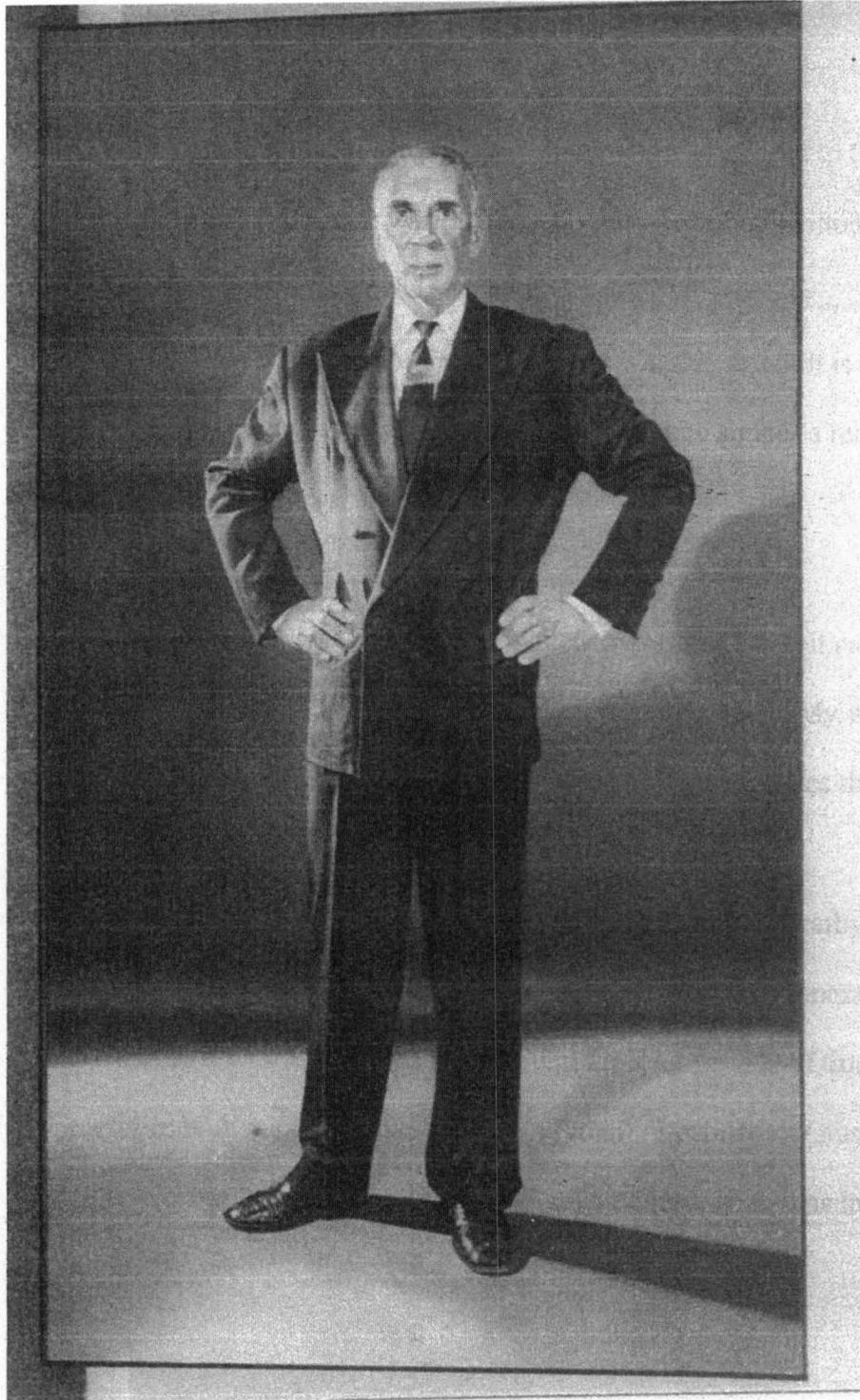
“You don't realize how bad this earthquake was,” he said. “The floor of our garage was covered with mud.”

I recently found a photograph of the painting Frank destroyed. I studied it hard in an attempt to find out why he hated it so much. Frank is right. The painting is undeniably hideous – the pose, the suit, the tie, the shoes – all hideous. But these were all things selected by him. Because I work from photographs, my naïve concern was to get these things right. I was attempting to paint what I saw, while Frank wanted me to do a painting of what he saw in his mind. Some things have happened since then which make me think the painting is amazingly accurate. It is a portrait of a monster of ego.

I loved Frank Langella in Dracula. We were good friends for a time. I even gave him a shot at directing Passione, a play by Albert Innaurato, which I co-produced.

Bernie Jacobs, the then head of the Schubert Organization, did not share my feelings about Frank. “Frank Langella is not a star,” he often said to me. He said it first when I was trying to get money from him for the production of Dracula. Every time he said it after that I was slightly annoyed and puzzled. I now think I understand what he meant.

I recently asked Frank's permission to use a photograph of the Catharine Huntington painting in this book. After all, it is one of my best paintings and Catharine was one of my best friends. Mark Sendroff, Frank's lawyer, called me to say that Frank was willing to give me such permission provided I gave him the right to control anything I might write about him. I told Mark this was impossible as the book had already been published on-line. Mark then asked to see what I had written about Frank and I



Frank Langella

immediately had the relevant pages sent to him.

I did not hear from Mark Sendroff again. I had André Bishop call him to find out what had happened. André reported back that Frank was displeased with what I had written about him and therefore he would not give me permission to use a photograph of the painting.

You can judge from the photograph of Frank's portrait whether or not it is accurate. I swear that every word I have written about Frank is also accurate. It is quite simply a record of what happened.

It was obvious by now that I was not going to make a living as a portrait painter. In the hope of eventually having a show in Portland, I began to paint things nearer at hand. My world had constricted in size. Now I would have only my friends, my house, and the few square miles that surround it for my subject matter. I would simply have to make something out of very little.

I painted the rocks in Arey's Cove. I began a series of paintings of a nearby apple tree whose shape interested me. When the paintings were finally done, they would encompass *The Four Seasons*. It snowed continually that first winter, so I was housebound for long periods of time. I painted the views from the windows in both my kitchen and my living room. I painted my own orchard covered with white. When Spring came, I did a painting of my lilacs and apple blossoms in bloom. In the fall, I did an Autumn garden.

I did a painting, *For Paul*, a view of my orchard in late afternoon light with a single empty kitchen chair in the middle of it. Once again in memory of Paul, I painted a group of objects that stood in one of my living room windows. There were shells, rocks and other inanimate objects including a small teddy bear which Paul had bought so he could have something to comfort him while he was dying. I called it *Memento Mori*.

But the ravages of loneliness took their toll. I began to have difficulty breathing. I was admitted to Pen Bay Hospital in Rockland for a checkup, but the doctors found nothing physically wrong. While I was in the hospital, I kept seeing a painting by Raphael Peale in my mind. It is called *After the Bath*, and it is a very realistic painting of a white cloth concealing a female nude. Raphael Peale had painted it as a joke on his inquisitive wife. He had hoped that in her nosiness, he might trick her into attempting to lift the cloth. For me the painting acquired some sort of mystical significance. When I got home, I began to do a series of paintings of white-and-back cloths that seemed to conceal something unknown. On the basis of these paintings, Tom Crotty agreed to give me a one-man show at the Frost Gully Gallery in Portland in October. He suggested that if I wanted to sell anything, I should do some smaller paintings. I took his advice and did a group of paintings of various rooms in my house bathed in September light.

I sold a number of paintings in this show, so for the first time in years I was no longer financially dependent on my friend from New York. But I was still just barely scraping by. In order to supplement my income I took a night job packing frozen lobsters at a local processing plant. I also took a job as a Sunday cook in a restaurant in town that was being started by a friend. Even though it involved hard physical labor for very little pay, I enjoyed working at the lobster plant. I was surrounded by Vinalhaven townspeople, many of them old women, who went about their chores with a sunny good nature. They simply accepted their lot in life without any fuss.

I was less of a success as a cook. My friend, Phil Crossman was starting a restaurant to be called Crow's Nest. Crow was his nickname from childhood. He asked me to cook for him. But I was

never able to make orders come out on time, and angry customers kept waiting for their breakfasts. Eventually we simplified the menu, but even this did not help. By now my friend had given up his dreams of having a quality restaurant. He was functioning as a short-order cook, and I was continually underfoot. He was relieved when August came around, and he could discharge me without any hurt feelings, I offered to work for him for nothing, but he politely refused even this offer.