

## THE NANTUCKET STAGE COMPANY

From now on I would have to support myself by painting. I desperately wanted to return to Nantucket, but because there was still no heat in the house other than old kerosene stoves and fireplaces, I delayed my departure for a couple months. Before I left, I made a series of abstract paintings of various places on the island as I saw them in my mind. To me they were like maps. I had also received a portrait commission from a banker in Kansas City to paint his four daughters, so I had sufficient money to tide me over.

This one portrait commission was so successful that it led to several more in Kansas City. I suppose I could have made a living as a portrait artist, but this wasn't the goal I had set for myself. I wanted to make paintings that were more deeply felt and personal. I persuaded Mr. Clancy to schedule a second show for me in 1971, and as soon as I moved to Nantucket, I began to work on it. By now I had put electrical heat in the house, and it was possible for me to live there year-round. We had a great

deal of snow that first winter after my return to the island, and the landscape seemed a reflection of my own state of mind. I painted four snow paintings, two large screens hinged in the Japanese manner, and two smaller paintings. Almost fittingly, two of the paintings have been lost.

One day during the summer, there was a knock at my door. The inn where I had formerly worked had sent their dishwasher over to see if he could rent an attic room from me. When I opened the door I saw one of the most beautiful young men I had ever seen. His name was Stewart Mittnacht, and he was a student at Princeton University. He stayed with me all summer, and at the end of that time I took some photographs of him which I later developed into a triptych of portraits. The central head is exactly how he looked to me the first moment I opened the door. These portraits were so successful that during the winter I wrote to Stewart and asked him if he would pose nude for me so that I might paint the rest of his body. He agreed, and eventually I completed paintings of his torso front and back, his hands, and his feet. I wanted to make a political statement. I have no idea of Stewart's sexual orientation, but as a homosexual I wanted to show what the male body meant for me. He never saw the completed series of paintings, nor did I hear from him for a long time. Eventually, when I was living in North Haven, I received a telephone call from an unknown lady. She asked me if I still had the paintings of Stewart. I told her that I did. She said, "Well, I'm going to marry him," and bought all the paintings.

I made arrangements to have a drink with Stewart and his fiancée. He had grown middle-aged and paunchy. I could not recognize the young man I had painted.

The show did not provoke the response I had hoped it would. Again there were a few good notices, again a few sales. When I returned to Nantucket I did a series of window paintings that seemed to reflect the loneliness I was feeling. More and more my paintings were devoid of people.

But then a miraculous event occurred that was to change my whole life once again. On one of

my periodic visits to New York, I bumped into Theoni Aldredge who had designed the costumes for The Saintliness of Margery Kempe. She had become one of the foremost costume designers in New York. She told me that she had loved my play, and felt that it had come before its time. She urged me to get the script to Zoe Caldwell, for whom she had just designed a show.

As soon as she said it, I could see the logic in Theoni's suggestion. For my money, Zoe Caldwell was one of the great actresses of our time. She seemed to me to be the perfect embodiment of Margery Kempe. Luckily she had just married Robert Whitehead, and through Terry Fay, I was able to get the script to her as I had originally written it. In a few days Terry Fay called back to say that Zoe would like to do the play.

I either personally contacted or wrote to every producer I knew in New York asking them if they would consider doing the play. But nobody wanted to touch a play already tainted by failure. I remembered the dictum I had learned from The Poet's Theatre: if no one else wants to produce the play, produce it yourself.

To this end I began to raise money to create The Nantucket Stage Company. Straight Wharf, the only theatre on the island, already housed an amateur company during the summer, so the first thing I had to do was find another location. I discovered that the Cyrus Pierce School had a minuscule stage at one end of a large assembly room, and I made arrangements with the local authorities to rent the building. To legitimize the plan, I knew I had to produce at least two other plays. I had recently read and enjoyed The House of Blue Leaves by John Guare. Its humor seemed to have been influenced by Red Eye of Love. I knew that John had worked as a caretaker one summer for one of my neighbors, so I wrote telling him what I was trying to do and asking if he had a new play I might produce. When we met in New York he said that indeed he had such a script. It was called Marco Polo Sings a Solo but it was not finished yet, so I could not read it. Nevertheless, I committed myself to doing it.

So began a long-term association with John Guare, one of the wittiest men I have ever known.

He made you feel clever simply by talking with him. It seemed that everything that happened to him became the material for an amusing anecdote, sometimes accurate, sometimes embellished. For a period of time our lives were inextricably bound together. He met his wife, Adele Chatfield-Taylor, in front of the fireplace in the downstairs bedroom of my house in Nantucket. Her grandmother had been one of the first people to buy my paintings. When she sold her great house on India Street, she bequeathed two of her grandchildren, Adele and Moncure, to my care. Adele was the head of the American Academy in Rome until 2013.

But all that was in the future. Right now we still did not have a third play. One day Mel Shapiro, the director of Marco Polo Sings a Solo, said to me, "Aren't you going to do anything that people might want to see?"

What did he have in mind? I asked.

"How about The Bat," he said.

"No, I have a better idea," I replied. "Let's do Dracula." I remembered the play from having worked on a production for Bela Lugosi back in my Boston Summer Theatre days. On the spot I decided to do it. I believe now, that when I made my whimsical decision, I was adding fuel to the fire of the vampire craze that was soon to sweep America. Later, at a cocktail party on Nantucket, Bobby Bushon, an old friend, stumbled up to me and said, "I hear you're going to do Dracula. You should get Edward Gorey to design it." He was drunk, as he often was, but I recognized a good suggestion when I heard one.

I had met Edward Gorey on a few occasions at performances of the New York City Ballet, but we did not really know each other. Nevertheless, I called him up, explained who I was and what I was trying to do, and then asked him if he would be willing to design the show for our tiny theater. "Sure, why not?" he replied. On the recommendation of Roger Morgan, our theatre designer and lighting man, I engaged Dennis Rosa to direct the production.

At just this inopportune moment, my mother died. Our last meeting was an angry one. My brother's daughter was to be married in Larchmont, and my mother insisted I come down from Nantucket for the wedding. The whole affair seemed to me to be rather late in the game because my niece and the young man she was to marry had already had a baby boy whom they had given away for adoption. Nevertheless I finally agreed. I would stay in New York with Sam Cohn and Julia Miles, who were now married. My brother would pick me up first thing in the morning and then pick up my mother in New Rochelle.

At six o'clock in the morning the telephone rang and awakened Sam. It was my brother calling to say that he could not pick me up after all because he had to get refreshments for the reception. I was forced to wake Sam a second time to ask him if I could borrow his car. I drove as fast as I could to pick up my mother, but we lost time searching for the house where the wedding was to be held.

By the time we got there it was too late. The justice of the peace had to be in his office by nine o'clock, so they had gone ahead without us. I was seething with anger. I could see a card table set up with the sticky cinnamon buns and pink champagne my brother had bought for refreshments. The guests were sitting on folding chairs in the living room watching television. In the pale blue glare they looked like zombies. Only once did they show any sign of life. When someone came into the living room to announce there was a new microwave in the kitchen, they all got up, as if on signal, and went to look.

The wedding guests included my brother's new girlfriend as well as his former wife and her new boyfriend, who happened to be the father of the groom. The groom's mother was in attendance as well. As if this were not complicated enough, my sister-in-law's father was there with his new wife. *His* former wife was oblivious to everything: she was drunk as was her wont.

When I drove my mother home I felt as though I had spent the morning in an insane asylum. "I

never want to see you or any other member of this family again as long as I live,” I exploded. I did not even bother to see my mother to her door. I sat in the car and watched for a few moments as she made her way wearily through a lightly falling snow to her apartment.

When I got back to Nantucket I had such a bad case of pneumonia that I had to be put in the hospital. Later I found out that my mother had also entered a hospital at the same time. It was as if we were in a race to see who could die first. She won.

I did not regret her death, nor did I regret my final words to her. I felt free for the first time in my life. I knew I would inherit a small sum of money, and I thought it might be useful to me if I needed a financial fallback for the theatre venture in Nantucket. “How could you do this to the memory of your father and mother?” our family lawyer asked when he got wind of my plans. “They worked all their lives for that money.” It was easier than he knew.

Then, almost as if in punishment for my evil thoughts, disaster struck. Zoe Caldwell had become pregnant and would be unable to come to Nantucket for the summer. The whole reason for my enormous enterprise was gone, but I could not pull out now. At Dennis Rosa’s suggestion I hired a friend of his to play the leading role in Margery Kempe. I did not feel she was up to the task, but I hoped for the best.

Our season was a very mixed bag. Dracula was an enormous critical and popular success. It was reviewed nationally in both the New York Times and Newsweek. My fears about the actress playing Margery Kempe proved to be well-founded, and the production sank without any visible trace. When John Guare finally delivered the script of Marco Polo, it turned out to be a shocker. I knew it would enrage a Nantucket audience, but even so, I felt it was an interesting play. If I wanted to be taken seriously as a producer, I had no choice but to do it. In the last act, one of the leading actors was required to castrate himself. On opening night when he appeared onstage in his blood-stained trousers,



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women in the audience gasped. But my gamble paid off. Richmond Crinkley (who was at that time Roger Steven's assistant at the Kennedy Center said he would like to create a long-standing relationship with The Nantucket Stage Company. The Kennedy Center would give us a certain sum of money each year to develop new American plays.

We had the money to continue, but we lost our space. The floor of the Cyrus Pierce School had been badly warped from the weight of the risers we put on it, so the town fathers were unlikely to rent it to us a second time. My only hope of continuing was to be able to rent the Straight Wharf Theater in the summertime. But, as I said, a local amateur troupe was deeply ensconced there. After two years of negotiations with Walter Beinecke, who owned the Theatre, and many bitter recriminations on the part of the townsfolk loyal to their local troupe, it was finally decided that the theatre could be shared. The Nantucket Stage Company would have it for the summer, and the local amateur troupe would have it for the rest of the year. At this point the town building inspector intervened. He said the building was unsafe and would have to be rebuilt. Not to be swayed from my purpose, I raised enough money to begin renovation on the building. But people in Nantucket had long memories of the production of Marco Polo Sings a Solo. On the day that I took over the building, just as renovation began, the building caught fire and burned to the ground. Arson was suspected but never confirmed.

As I watched the fire, I was aware of the whole town watching me. More than the building was going up in flames. So were all my dreams. The Nantucket Stage Company had large debts. The only way I could meet them was by selling my house and moving away from the island. I left on a rainy day in early September. As I stood on the deck of the ferryboat watching Nantucket recede in the distance, tears were streaming down my face.