THE SAINTLINESS OF MARGERY KEMPE

The cost of Off-Broadway productions in 1959 was much lower than now. With a small inheritance, and money I had saved during my time in the Marine Corps, I had enough to do the show. I also hoped we might get a few outside investors. I enlisted Sam Cohn and Ed Hastings to assist me in the endeavor. Sam Cohn was then working in the legal department of William Morris. He later had a legendary career as an agent. I had met him through another agent, Ed Parone. Ed Hastings I had known during the one year I had spent at Yale Drama School. He went on to become the head of the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco.

Ed Thommen, who had directed the show in Cambridge, did not want to do it in New York. So the search for a director began. At first, William Ball agreed to direct the play. But then fate intervened.

4 follows

"What about me? said James Price.

James Price was a a handsome young man of about thirty-five with wavy blonde hair and intense blue eyes, with whom I was living at the time. I had met him at Yale, and we had become fast friends. He had gone on to a job in the Drama Department at Vassar, but we constantly corresponded during my two years in the Marine Corps. Almost inevitably, we fell into a sexual relationship.

One spring day we were lying on the lawn outside his home near Poughkeepsie. I told him that by the time I had had homosexual experiences with other men, but the person I really wanted was him.

He looked at me with the cold, hard eyes of a lion. "If we do this, we can't go back again," he said.

I leaned over and kissed him

I should have listened to his advice.

I didn't know it at the time, but the only love I had known up to then was punishment. Unconsciously, I must have thought that this was what real love was.

In Jim Price I had found the punishment I sought. He was far more intelligent than I was. I was in awe of his intellect.

In all the terrible incidents that follow I do not blame Jim. He gave me exactly what I craved. I see them as comedy now. If only they had not been so sad.

At first I was taken aback by Jim's request to direct Margery Kempe. He had directed a production of Macbeth as his senior project at Yale, and I did not think it was very good. But he was very clever at getting around this obstacle.

"If you care about me, you will give me this opportunity," he said.

I had always been accused of being too egotistical, too self centered. I wanted to prove I could genuinely care about another person. After much reluctance on the part of Sam Cohn and Ed Hastings, I persuaded them to meet with Jim and me in my apartment so he could tell us how he intended to direct the show.

"I won't know how I'm going to direct your play until after I've done it," he said. "I believe it is necessary for a director to find the proper approach to every play, but I always rely on the play itself to tell me what this approach is."

"That doesn't give us much to go on," I said.

"If you were interested in the conventional approach, we wouldn't be talking, would we?

"I'd like the play to be a success."

"There are all sorts of successes."

"I mean a real success."

"If you want a commercial success, I'm sure you could hire hundreds of competent Off-Broadway hacks who would do a much better job that I would."

"I'm not especially interested in a commercial success," I said.

"If you want the average Off-Broadway production with all that awful amateur acting and tacky scenery, I'm not the man for the job."

"That's not what I had in mind at all."

"What do you want me to tell you? I can't guarantee you a success. If you hire me, this play may turn out to be a flop. It may turn out to be a terrible failure. I can't promise you anything."

"No, it would be impossible for anyone to predict what the critics will say on opening night."

"Let me put it this way. If you had a choice between playing it safe or taking a chance, if you had a choice between having your play turn out to be a "nice" little show, or a show that is so theatrically exciting it lifts the customers right out of their seats and is remembered and talked about for years, if you had a choice between mere competence or genius, if you had a choice between the average director or me, which would you choose?"

"I'd choose you, I guess," I said.

Later, I met with Sam Cohn and Ed Hastings over cups of coffee in an Automat to discuss James Price's qualifications.

"He's brilliant, isn't he?" I said.

"He certainly talks well," said Sam.

"I think we'd do much better to take a chance on an unknown quantity like Jim, rather than hiring someone whose work we've seen and know is awful."

"There are lots of things about Jim that make me very nervous," said Ed Hastings.

"Such as?"

"Well, for one thing, he's never directed a show in New York before."

"Everyone has to begin sometime."

"He doesn't know anything about actors."

"It's no problem finding actors in New York. There are hundreds of good actors begging for work."

"Jim wants rewrites," said Sam.

"Any director we hire is going to want rewrites."

"Yes, but Jim isn't willing to give us the slightest hint on how he plans to approach the play."

"You've got to have faith in this business."

"And then there's always the matter of his relationship with you," said Ed.

"Now we come to the crux of the matter."

"Damn it, John, it isn't a healthy situation."

"I think I'm a mature person," I said. "I think I can be objective in a situation like this. It is true that I'm – fond – of Jim. I can't deny that I'm interested in doing anything I can to promote his career. But if I thought for one minute that our – relationship – as you put it – jeopardized your play's chances of success, I wouldn't dream of hiring him. I want Jim to direct this play for a very simple reason. I think he's the best man for the job."

"I wish I were as convinced as you are."

"You've got to trust me about this," I said. "After all, It's my money."

"Yes, that's true," said Sam Cohn.

James Price was hired to direct my play, and work on The Saintliness of Margery Kempe began

in earnest.

"Now, let's begin with the very first line," said Jim. He and I had met in my apartment to discuss the revisions of the play that he felt were absolutely necessary.

"You mean you're not even satisfied with the first line?" I said.

"We're going to go through this play line by line, word by word, if necessary," said Jim. "I intend to question every single sentence and if there's anything in the script that doesn't hold up under my questioning, it will simply have to be rewritten."

"It might be easier to write a new play," I said.

Work proceeded slowly. Every day for weeks, James Price and I met in my apartment. Jim acted out all the scenes, playing every part himself, in order, he said, to see if the "feel" of the characterizations was right. Now he was Margery gazing skyward, a kitchen towel draped around his shoulders to serve as shawl. Now he was Robert of Caistor, the Vicar of St. Stevens, supporting himself on the handle of a dust mop. Occasionally, Jim would be seized by an inspiration, and, in a fit of creative frenzy, he would dictate lines – sometimes whole scenes – to me, as I sat at my typewriter, or with a piece of paper in my hand jotting down his every word. Each such seizure left him so limp and exhausted that work on the play would have to be suspended for a time while he took a short nap upon my bed. There was hardly one change in the script that I did not resist, but Jim always had his methods of persuasion.

"Now we come to the scene where Margery talks to the horse," said James Price.

"What about the horse?" I said.

"I don't know what about the horse. You tell me."

"I'm not going to cut the horse. He's one of my favorite characters in the play."

"I didn't say you have to cut the horse. I'm just trying to find out what you had in mind when

you wrote this particular portion of the play so I'll know how to interpret it. I'm honestly confused. I need your help."

"I wanted to have someone for Margery to talk to."

"And that's why she talks to a horse."

"I thought it was a funny idea."

"I see. And is the horse that Margery talks to a real horse?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, is the horse real?"

"He's a stage horse."

"But is he real?"

"What do you mean, 'Is he real?' It's two actors playing a horse."

"It's a make-believe horse then?"

"It's two actors playing a real horse."

"Do you really expect an audience to swallow that?"

"I don't understand what the problem is."

"My problem is this. I want the play to be as realistic as possible. We're agreed that the play should be real, aren't we?"

"What do you mean by 'real?'"

"Well, Margery is real, isn't she?"

"It's an actress playing the part of Margery"

"But you want the audience to think she's real, don't you? You want them to <u>really</u> care about what happens to her."

"Yes, I want them to care."

"Well, how can they take her problems seriously when she talks to an imaginary horse?"

"I told you it isn't an imaginary horse."

"Then it's a real horse?"

"It's two actors playing a real horse. You've got an actress playing the part of Margery. I don't see why you can't have two actors playing a horse."

"The only way of solving the problem so far as I can see is by getting a real horse."

"Be practical. That isn't practical."

"I'm just trying to interpret your play the way you wrote it. You tell me you want a real horse, so I think we should get a real horse."

"It isn't practical to get a real horse."

"So far as I'm concerned, its just as practical as having two actors dress up as a horse. Oh, come on, John, be serious. Have you ever seen two actors prancing about the stage in a horse's suit?"

"We could get dancers."

"Thanks a lot. Have you ever seen two dancers prancing about the stage in a horse's suit?"

"It's your job as the director to see that they don't prance."

"The best director in the world could never make an audience believe that two actors dressed in a horse's suit were a real horse."

"You're just trying to make me cut the horse."

"If you see any other way of solving the problem, I wish you'd tell me what it is."

The argument hung suspended at this point for several days until finally, James Price said, "All right, suppose I give in. Suppose I tell you you can have your horse. Where are we going to get this horse's outfit?"

"How should I know where you're going to get it?" I said. "You can rent it. I'm sure there must be hundreds of costume houses in New York where you can rent a horse's outfit."

"Boy, if there's anything I hate to see on-stage it's two actors prancing about in a moth-eaten old horse's outfit."

"I told you we could get dancers."

"That isn't the problem."

"It doesn't have to be moth-eaten."

"Have you ever seen a horse's outfit that wasn't?"

"If you had your way this play would be just like every other play."

"Do you really think the success or failure of your play depends on a horse?"

"That's the sort of play I wrote. It's things like the horse that give the play it's special flavor."

"I'll say it's special, pretty special, all right. Every tenth-rate vaudeville act had a horse in it."

"What's wrong with vaudeville?"

"Haven't you heard, it's dead?"

"That's the sort of play I wrote. I wanted it to have the flavor of old-time vaudeville. I wanted it to be like an old-time music hall show."

"Vaudeville is dead and I have a sneaking suspicion what killed it. It was probably all those horse acts."

"Very funny."

"You think this horse is so important to your play, but do you want to know what's going to happen as soon as that audience sees two actors come on-stage dressed in a mangy old horse's suit? Your play is going to go right out the window."

Several more days passed in argument. Neither James Price nor I was willing to budge an inch.

"Give me that phone," said Jim. But he didn't wait for me to hand it to him. He grabbed it

himself and began dialing a number.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Hello, Sam," said Jim.

I could hear a faint buzz in the the telephone receiver, but I couldn't make out what Sam was saying.

"Sam, it looks like you're going to have to find yourself another director."

The buzz in the telephone receiver grew louder, but I still couldn't hear what Sam was saying.

"It's that horse, Sam. It's that God-damned horse"

More buzzing.

"Sam, my nerves can't stand very much more of this. It's been a steady battle every inch of the way."

More buzzing.

James Price handed the telephone to me.

"Sam wants to talk to you," he said.

"Hello, Sam," I said, sheepishly

"Hello, John. What seems to be the trouble?" asked Sam.

"There's no trouble. I'm sorry Jim bothered you with this. We were just discussing the horse."

"Apparently, Jim feels the horse has got to go."

"What do you think about the horse?"

"I don't have any feeling about the horse one way or the other."

"If you remove the horse it really isn't my play any more."

"I don't have any artistic feelings about the horse. I look at these things as a crass, practical businessman. I hate to be mercenary, but if you got rid of the horse it would be two less salaries on the payroll every week."

"Let me think about it some more."

"I know you'll make the right decision."

"Is the horse out?" asked James Price.

"I said I was going to think about it," I said.

"Aw, come on fellas," said Sam. "You're two big boys now. I'm sure you can settle this matter between you."

I hung up the telephone. I sat for a long time staring into space. After about half an hour in which neither Jim nor I said a word, I suddenly jumped to my feet.

"All right, let's throw out the horse. Let's throw out the whole, God-damned play."

I hurled the manuscript into the air. The pages fluttered to the floor.

"Don't be childish," said Jim.

"I'm not being childish," I said.

"You are. You're being very childish. Who's going to pick up those papers?"

"What difference does it make? Leave them where they are. I'm not going to do any more rewrites on the play."

"Don't you see why you resist giving up the horse? He's a symbol of your childhood. That's why you hold onto him so tenaciously. You can't bear to part with your childhood."

"I just thought it would be funny to have a horse in the play"

"You'll never become a real playwright unless you're willing to grow up. Why don't you just try it my way?

"Who's Margery going to talk to if she doesn't talk to the horse? There's nobody else onstage."

"She can always talk to God."

"Do you think that will be as funny?"

"What is this – jokesville? Who do you think you are – Joe Miller?"

"The play is a comedy," I said.

"John, don't you love your leading character?" Jim asked.

So I got rid of the horse.

"There, it works much better my way, don't you think?" said Jim.

"I don't know. I sort of liked the horse," I said.

"Am I ruining your beautiful play?" asked James Price.

Under the circumstances it was only natural that tension continued between James Price and myself. One night, long after I had collapsed into my bed from exhaustion, I was awakened by a knock on my bedroom door. I opened it to discover Jim standing in the front hallway, drunk.

"Why, Jim, what can I do for you at this hour of the night?" I asked.

"I've come to tell you that I'm not going to let you take advantage of me in this way," said Jim.

"What do you mean?"

"Nobody takes advantage of James Price and gets away with it."

"I have no intentions of taking advantage of you."

"I can tell when someone is trying to take advantage of me, and I'm not going to let you get away with it."

"You're drunk."

"Nobody takes advantage of James Price and gets away with it."

"I wish you'd say what you mean."

"I'll tell you what I mean. I've practically written your whole God-damned play for you, that's what I mean."

"It's true that you've done a great deal of work on the play. Nobody appreciates that as much as I do. But I don't think you've done anything more than what a director usually does."

"I've written your whole God-damned play and I intend to be paid for it."

"What do you mean?"

"Nobody takes advantage of James Price and gets away with it."

"You said that."

"I want it in writing. I want it in writing that I've written your whole God-damned play and I want to be paid for it. This play would never have been a success if it hadn't been for me."

"Whether the play is a success or failure still remains to be seen."

"I've written your whole God-damned play for you, and I want it in writing that I get fifty percent of whatever you earn."

"You'll have to talk this over with Sam."

"I'm letting you off cheap."

"You'll have to discuss it with Sam."

Months went by while James Price and I bickered in this manner. It wasn't until February 1959 that Jim finally pronounced the script completed to his satisfaction. I could not tell whether the play had been helped or hindered by the rewrites, and I suspected that Jim's decision was based more on a natural attrition of human energy rather than any other factor. Neither of us had the strength to go on, and so we simply scooped together the many snatches of scenes and fragments of dialogue that had resulted from Jim's assaults upon the play, sent these out to be typed and bound, and then used this mutilated, this patched-and-sewn version of the original script as the basis on which to begin the casting of actors. At the same time, James Price turned his attention to the scenery.

"Now, what are we going to do about the scenery?" he asked.

"What scenery?" I asked. "I always intended the play to be performed on a bare stage."

"That's been done before."

"Yes, I suppose so. Still, there's no sense spending a lot of money for scenery if you don't need it."

"I'm so tired of conventional scenery," said Jim, as usual not paying the slightest bit of attention to anyone other than himself. "I wish we could get a real artist to do the sets. What we need for this play is someone like Florine Stetheimer."

"Who's he?" I asked.

"She," Jim corrected me. "She's the woman who did the famous scenery for Four Saints in Three Acts."

"Oh?" I said.

"You must have read about it," said Jim. "The entire set was made out of cellophane."

Later, in discussing the production of my play with someone whose knowledge of the New York art world I regarded as far superior to my own, I mentioned the problem of the scenery.

"The person you should see is Bob Rauschenberg," said my friend.

"Does he do things with cellophane?" I asked.

"He uses anything he can find," said my friend.

The sensible thing for me to have done at this point would have been to check on Robert Rauschenberg's work, but the idea never even crossed my mind. Solely on the basis of my friend's recommendation, I got Robert Rauschenberg's telephone number and then called him to ask point blank if he would be interested in designing the scenery for The Saintliness of Margery Kempe. Robert Rauschenberg said he would first have to read the script in order to tell whether or not the play appealed to him, and I personally offered to drop off a copy at his studio that very afternoon.

And so, blindly, without any certain knowledge of what lay in store for me, I set forth on my first encounter with the New York art world. The journey itself was filled with menace and

foreboding, and when I reached my destination I discovered that I had entered a region where things were not always what they appeared to be.

Robert Rauschenberg's studio was located on the lower tip of Manhattan, and, although I had been given very careful instructions, I had a great deal of trouble in finding the place. I kept getting lost in the hundreds of little streets and the alleyways that line the New York waterfront, and my search was not helped by the fact that it was pouring rain. By the time I reached the front door of the loft building where Robert Rauschenberg lived and worked, I was drenched to the skin.

The front door of the building was open, as Robert Rauschenberg had instructed me it would be, so I let myself in, walked up a flight of stairs, and knocked on the only visible door, also as Robert Rauschenberg had instructed me.

The door to the loft was opened by a young man whose face was covered with shaving lather. I assumed he was Robert Rauschenberg.

"Hi," said the young man.

"Hi," I said.

"Did you have any trouble finding the place?"

"Not much."

"Why don't you go into the other room and sit down?"

The young man smiled, and then, without waiting for a reply, he disappeared through the bathroom door behind him.

I walked into the other room which was barren of anything resembling furniture except for a low black platform shoved against one of the side walls. After a few moments of indecision, I sat down on this. Because I couldn't find any place to hang my raincoat or umbrella, I kept my raincoat on, and the umbrella in my hand, although I was very much aware of the puddle of water forming on the floor around me.

The bathroom door opened.

"Hi," said the young man who had just emerged. His face was free of shaving lather.

"Hi," I said.

"Did you have much trouble finding the place?"

"A little. Not much." It struck me as curious to be asked the same questions all over again ,but I felt it would be rude not to answer.

"Just make yourself comfortable," said the young man. He smiled and disappeared through the bathroom door.

I looked around the room where I was sitting. It was filled from floor to ceiling with what I assumed to be junk, and I wondered how so much debris had ever managed to accumulate in one place. There were old tires, broken umbrellas, orange crates, chairs with legs missing, floor model radios – vintage 1930, old galvanized buckets, dented and bent, stuffed chickens, stuffed eagles, and, most curious of all, an enormous stuffed goat.

The bathroom door opened.

The young man who had just emerged nodded to me, and I nodded back, and then the young man walked into another room. I was surprised to see that his face was again covered with shaving lather.

After a few seconds the young man returned, nodding to me once again, and then disappeared through the bathroom door.

Immediately thereafter, the bathroom door reopened.

"Hi, I'm Bob Rauschenberg," said the young man who had just emerged. His face was free of shaving lather. He walked into the room where I was sitting and extended his hand for me to shake.

I rose to greet him.

"I'm John Wulp," I said.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

"That's all right," I said. "Here's the script. I don't know whether it will appeal to you or not. You know, I'm ashamed to admit it, but I've never seen your work."

"Just look around you," said Robert Rauschenberg, indicating the stuffed goat and an orange crate with a stuffed chicken on top.

"Is this your work?" I asked, incredulous.

"Yes, but it isn't plugged in yet," said Robert Rauschenberg. He put a plug in a wall socket and a naked light bulb in the orange crate began to blink on and off.

The bathroom door opened.

"Hi," said the young man who had just emerged. His face was free of shaving lather.

"Hi," I said, nervously.

It turned out that the second young man was Jasper Johns, another young painter with whom Robert Rauschenberg shared the loft. Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns bore a striking resemblance to each other.

"I think I'd better be going," I said.

"There's no need to hurry," said Robert Rauschenberg.

"No, no, I don't want to take up too much of your time," I said. "I'll call you tomorrow to find out how you liked the script."

I stumbled down the stairs and out into the rain.

The next day when I called, I was relieved to hear that Robert Rauschenberg felt he wouldn't be right for the show.

"The person you should get to do your scenery is Louise Nevelson," said Robert Rauschenberg.

"What does she do?" I asked.

"She makes walls out of wooden boxes," said Robert Rauschenberg. It's sort of difficult to describe."

"Is there any way I can see her work?" I had learned my lesson.

"I believe the Modern Museum has one of her walls," said Robert Rauschenberg.

"The Modern Museum?"

"You know, the Museum of Modern Art on Fifty-Third Street."

I took James Price with me to see Louise Nevelson's wall in the Museum of Modern Art. It was called Cathedral of Night and was composed of every imaginable wooden object ranging from broken fragments of moulding to bowling pins all of which had been arranged in boxes and painted a luminous black.

"She seems to be very Medieval," I said.

"She's perfect," said Jim.

Therefore, I called Louise Nevelson and made arrangements for Jim and myself to drop off a script at her studio that afternoon.

The studio was located right in the heart of Chinatown. When I rang the front doorbell, Jim and I had to endure the hostile stares of passing Asian immigrants for what seemed like an eternity before a young girl finally swung open the massive front door. Without a word, she beckoned us to follow, and then she conducted us up four flights of stairs and through a labyrinth of corridors stacked with fragments of wood painted black and arranged into elaborate and grotesque patterns until we were brought face to face with the artist herself.

Louise Nevelson was seated at a long Medieval table covered with a heavily textured rug. She was wearing a tall peaked cap and smoking a cigarette which she held between her thumb and index finger. All four walls of the room were covered with large black wooden structures, and, because the

room was small, these structures took on a ponderous effect.

Louise Nevelson said very little but simply smoked her cigarette and stared at me intently with her black-rimmed eyes as I talked. Overwhelmed by my surroundings and the smoke from Louise Nevelson's cigarette, I described the play as a statement of the universal conflict between the forces of earth and sky, body and mind, flesh and spirit.

"I'll do it," said Louise Nevelson.

"Don't you even want to read the script?" I asked.

"I don't need to read the script," said Louise Nevelson. "I know what your play is all about without reading it. It's the story of my life."

"The first thing I'll need is a ground plan," said James Price.

"A ground plan?"

"You know, just a simple diagram of the stage so the actors can tell where to make their entrances and exits."

"I don't work from plans. I work from inspiration."

"It can be a very rough sketch," said Jim meekly.

"I thought I would come down to the theatre with one or two assistants a few days before the performance, and create something. Go home and start saving cardboard boxes. I think cardboard boxes might be more suitable for stage work that wooden ones. Wooden boxes are so heavy. Ask your grocer. Ask your neighbors. Tell everyone you know to start saving cardboard boxes. I'll need hundreds of cardboard boxes."

"The only other person I can think of who might be right to do the scenery is Bob Mitchell," said James Price.

Bob Mitchell was a friend whom both James Price and I had known at Yale.

"Has he ever had a professional job designing scenery in New York?" I asked.

"No, but he's very anxious to try," said Jim.

James Price got in touch with Bob Mitchell who agreed to do some designs on speculation. Apparently, he had already been at work on the project, because just a few days later, Sam Cohn, Ed Hastings, James Price, and I were invited over to see his small skylight studio on Minetta Lane to see a model of the set he had constructed.

I must have made some minor objection about the scenery, because James Price was immediately on the defensive.

"Give the boy time," he said. "Bob hasn't worked out all the technical problems yet."

Afterward, in a taxicab going uptown, Sam, Ed, Jim, and I were discussing Bob Mitchell's designs.

"I think Bob's designs are marvelous," said Jim.

"They look expensive to me," said Ed.

"His designs may be marvelous, but they would never work for my show," I said. "I've always imagined a very simple production."

"You two, you make me sick!" said Jim. "I listened to the both of you nagging away at poor Bob for hours and all I could figure out is that you're both jealous. Of course, he hasn't worked out all the details yet, but give him time. He's only had a few days to think about the scenery. I feel a talent such as Bob's should be encouraged."

Bob Mitchell was engaged to do the scenery.

After weeks of negotiation, Sam Cohn finally signed a lease on The York Theatre, and rehearsals for <u>The Saintliness of Margery Kempe</u> were scheduled to begin within a few days time.

Now, all the details of the production were brought to a hasty conclusion. I was distressed to discover that in many instances, this haste made it impossible for me to get those very things Jim and I had discussed and planned during all the months when everything had proceeded at a snail's pace.

Actors were unavailable because they had gotten other shows.

The costume designer was forced to bow out of her assignment because at the last minute she had gotten a Broadway show to design. We hired Theoni Aldrege instead. It was one of her first design jobs.

Investors reneged on their pledges.

Eventually, however, all these problems were resolved in one way or another and the show was ready to go into rehearsal. I felt the only serious compromise that had been made was that Sasha Van Sherler, the actress who was James Price's and my first choice for the role of Margery had been unwilling to accept the part because she was up for a Broadway show, Noel Coward's Look After Lulu, and did not want to jeopardize her chances. Our second choice, Franny Sternhagen, a former student of Jim's at Vassar, proved to be four months pregnant, but we decided to use her anyway. Jim assured me that Margery's costumes could be designed in such a way that no one in the audience would be able to tell that Franny was pregnant.

Our first read-through was scheduled for mid-February. At ten o'clock on a Monday morning, the rehearsal hall on Second Ave was crowded with people. In addition to the cast of thirty, there was also the production staff that Sam Cohn had assembled which was about equal in number. It consisted of Sam himself, Norman Bland, the production stage manage, Joe Handy, the stage manager, Max Brightman, the company lawyer, Bobby Willig, a young man who had invested one thousand dollars of his mother's money in the show in return for the privilege of being allowed to get coffee for Sam and the cast, a function for which he would be listed in the program as Associate Producer, and Myron

Lustig, a garment manufacturer from Brooklyn who had also agreed to invest one thousand dollars in the show on the condition that a red-headed girl friend of his be given a small part and also that he be named company treasurer so he could keep an eye on how his money was spent.

"Where are the contracts?" asked Sam.

"I haven't got them," said Norman Bland.

"Neither have I," said Joe Handy.

"Don't look at me," said Max Brightman.

"You're the company lawyer," said Sam.

"So? I'm not an errand boy," said Max Brightman. "I write contracts and check them over. I don't pick them up."

"Who was supposed to pick up the contracts at Actor's Equity?" asked Sam.

"I gave Bobby a check to cover the bonds," said Myron Lustig.

"And I deposited the check at Actor's Equity," said Bobby Willig. "But it wasn't a certified check and they said it would take three days to clear."

"You mean you didn't pick up the contracts?" asked Sam.

"I told Myron a certified check," said Bobby Willig. "There's no way I can get the contracts until the check clears."

"When will that be?" Sam asked.

"I deposited the check yesterday, so it should take two more days," said Bobby Willig.

"What will we do?" asked Sam. "We've got a cast of thirty people sitting around and no contracts. Do you suppose it's safe to start rehearsals without them?"

"As your lawyer, I wouldn't advise it," said Max Brightman.

"I've got a production staff of six people and nobody can think to pick up the contracts," said Sam.

The start of rehearsals was postponed two days.

With nothing to do for the rest of the day, I began to wander aimlessly on Second Avenue. I heard someone running to catch up with me, and when I turned I saw Bobby Willig.

"Do you mind if I walk with you?" asked Bobby.

I shrugged my shoulders and resumed walking. Bobby Willig fell in step beside me.

We walked in silence for several blocks, until at last we came to an intersection where Bobby Willig said he had to turn off. In one final effort to dispel my gloom, Bobby put a reassuring hand on my shoulder.

"Don't worry, everything's going to be all right," he said. "We all love your play."

"Thank you," I said. And then, fearing that I had slighted Bobby by my silence , I added, "I hope it's funny."

"Funny?" Bobby Willig sounded puzzled.

"I wrote it as a comedy," I hastened to explain.

"It's so passionate, that's what I like about it," said Bobby Willig. He smiled, and I could see that he still wore braces on his teeth.

When rehearsals finally did begin, it made me nervous to watch them. I felt that very few of the actors had any understanding either of their parts or the play that I had written, but James Price assured me that this was just because they were unfamiliar with their scripts. He suggested it would be a good idea if I stayed away during the early stages of rehearsal.

I accepted his banishment with as much good grace as possible, but I was relieved when Jim finally invited me back to look in on a rehearsal once again. When I arrived at the rehearsal hall, I found Franny Sternhagen and James Harwood, the actor who was playing the part of Robert of Caistor,

gloomily studying their scripts. Jim was standing by a window smoking a cigarette and idly staring at the traffic on Second Avenue.

"Ah, John, we've been waiting for you," he said. "We've been having a little trouble with one of the scenes and we thought maybe you could help us." He dropped the cigarette to the floor and ground it out with his heel.

"That's what I'm here for," I said. "Which scene is it?"

"It's the first scene of the second act – you remember where Margery is talking to the Vicar of St. Stevens in his rose garden."

"What's wrong with that scene?" I asked, turning to the proper place in my own script. "That's one of my favorite scenes in the whole play."

"Well, it doesn't work," said Jim. "I thought I'd ask Franny and James to improvise the scene for you to see if that doesn't give you some idea on how to handle the rewrites."

All the while Jim was speaking, I was hastily reading the scene over to myself.

"I don't see why it doesn't work the way I wrote it," I said.

"All right, Franny," said Jim peremptorily. "Just play the scene any way you feel it. Say whatever comes into your head."

"Do you mind if I sit down through the scene?" asked Franny. The strain of rehearsing a play and carrying a baby at the same time was beginning to tell on her.

"No, play it any way you feel like," said Jim.

"Are you ready?" said James Harwood

"We're ready," said Jim

"My roses are touched with blight," said James Harwood assuming the character of the Vicar of St. Stevens.

"Have you tried spraying them with insecticide?" asked Franny.

"Insecticide?" I asked.

"Shhh," said Jim.

"What's she talking about insecticide for?" I asked. "Does she know this play is supposed to take place in the Middle Ages? Insecticide wasn't invented in the Middle Ages."

"It's just an improvisation," said Jim.

"Do you want me to go on?" asked Franny

"I don't care if it's an improvisation," I said. "If that's all the understanding of the play she's got, you'd do better to be rehearsing rather than wasting time on a lot of improvisations."

"I'll let you settle this between you," said Franny. She hefted herself from the chair where she was sitting, and, walking on the flat of her heels, she waddled out of the room. James Harwood followed her.

"I can't have you upsetting my actors like this," said Jim, as soon as he and I were alone.

"I don't care whether I'm upsetting your actors or not!" I said. "Picture what your actors are doing to me!"

"Will you please lower your voice."

"No, I will not lower my voice. I don't know whether you realize it or not, but I've spent months writing and rewriting this play. I'm not going to let you make a fool of me by calling me up here in front of a bunch of actors and asking me to write a scene off the top of my head. Either do the play the way I wrote it, or don't do it at all."

I was so angry that I picked up a hardbound copy of the script and threw it at Jim. As a result of this admittedly rash and impulsive action, I was banished from rehearsals a second time.

In desperation, I begged Sam Cohn to fire James Price. I said that the play being rehearsed bore no relation to the play I had written. I said that I felt we were doomed to failure.

My pleas fell on deaf ears. I was caught in a trap of my own devising. "You picked him," said Sam.

I accepted my second banishment with less good grace than my first because I knew there was little likelihood of my being re-admitted to rehearsals. During the next few days, I besieged Sam with a constant stream of telephone calls in an effort to keep myself informed about what was happening to my play.

"How's Bob Mitchell coming with the scenery?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Sam. "Now that you mention him, it suddenly occurs to me I haven't heard from Bob Mitchell for weeks."

"Maybe I'd better check up on him."

"Yes, why don't you do that? It'll give you something to keep you busy."

The scenery was being constructed in a large unheated gymnasium of an abandoned Masonic Hall around the corner from The York. When I arrived there, I discovered Bob Mitchell dressed in a navy pea jacket with a knitted blue woolen cap upon his head, working on an elaborate Medieval chair for Margery to sit in. An electric heater was on the floor beside him, but it did little to warm the vast reaches of the hall. Bob Mitchell was surrounded by piles of lumber and rolls of canvas, but I couldn't see any evidence of a set.

"What's happened to the scenery?" I inquired.

"I haven't started working on the actual scenery just yet," said Bob Mitchell. "I've been working on Margery's chair.

"You haven't got <u>any</u> of the scenery built?"

"Don't get excited."

"Don't get excited! Do you realize this play begins previews in less than a week? What have

you been doing with yourself?"

"I told you. I've been working on this chair."

"You mean you'e been working for over two whole weeks and all you've got to show for it is one lousy chair?"

"I've been constructing it very carefully," said Bob Mitchell. "I thought I could use it in my apartment when the play closes."

I had built and painted scenery at Dartmouth, and so, with the help of two union carpenters, working around the clock for a full week in the unheated gymnasium, I was able to get the scenery built, painted, and installed in the theatre. But by the time the previews began, I was so exhausted, I couldn't tell anything about my play. I was aware that my feelings might have been caused by my own fatigue, but somehow, everything that happened on stage seemed very remote to me.

After the first preview, I tried to discuss my feelings with James Price. I explained that somehow the play didn't seem to be mine any more.

"But don't you see, that's bound to happen," said Jim. "Having a play produced is like giving birth to a child. If we've been successful in our work over these past few months, by opening night, the play won't be your play or my play or the actors' play any more. It will have a life of it's own."

But still I wasn't convinced. In desperation, I turned to Sam Cohn for reassurance.

"It is going to be all right, isn't it?" I asked.

"It can't miss," said Sam.

Of the entire production staff, only Bobby Willig expressed any doubts. "What happened to all the passion?" he asked.

After the last preview performance, Bob Mitchell came on-stage with a large bucket of dark

green paint he had just mixed.

"What have you got there?" asked Sam.

"I've been looking at the set and I don't think the color is right," said Bob Mitchell. "It needs to be repainted."

"Are you out of your mind?" asked Sam.

"The way I look at the problem there's just one way to do a thing and that's the right way," said Bob Mitchell. "The set needs to be repainted."

A heated argument ensued which soon engaged the cast, the entire production staff, and those members of the preview audience who were still standing around backstage talking to friends in the show. Most people were of the opinion that it was't feasible to repaint the set on the night before the opening, but Bob Mitchell was not to be swayed from his purpose.

As I listened to everyone shouting back and forth, I thought of all the points on which I had personally given in during the course of the production. I thought of how I had been barred from rehearsals. I thought of the set itself which I had never really liked, but which I had accepted. I had made all these concessions simply to get my play done, but I was not so blind I could not see that because of all these concessions the play that was being done was not actually mine at all.

"If the set designer says the set needs to be repainted, damn it, it needs to be repainted," I said. I grabbed a paintbrush, dipped it into the bucket of paint that Bob Mitchell had mixed, and made a dramatic swipe across the set After that, the argument was settled. There was nothing to do but repaint the set.

A few people pitched in to help, but as the night dwindled into the early morning hours, all put down their paintbrushes and went home. By two o'clock in the morning, only Bob Mitchell and myself were left in the empty theatre.

I kept lugging a work ladder around the stage and hauling buckets of paint up and down it all

night long while I repainted the set. Occasionally Bob Mitchell would lend a hand, but most of the time he sat out in the auditorium telling me whenever I had missed a spot.

"If you want this set repainted so badly, why don't you get up here and help?" I asked.

"I'm coming! I'm coming!" said Bob Mitchell.

But he never did

The next morning, when James Price came into the theatre to run over some light cues with the stage manager for that evening's performance, he found me stretched out on the apron of the stage sound asleep. Bob Mitchell had collapsed on the cot in Franny's dressing room.

"I see you got the set repainted," said Jim.

"That God-damned little bastard, Bob Mitchell, you know what he did?" I said. "He let me repaint the entire set all by myself."

"I can't tell you how much I admire him."

"Admire him?"

"Yes, I listened to everyone yakking away at him last night, and I was so proud when he didn't give an inch. Bob Mitchell is the only person in this whole production who has never compromised.

The official opening of The Saintliness of Margery Kempe was set for the night of March 14, 1959 at 7:30 p.m. During the afternoon, I went home to my own apartment and took a nap. It was the first real rest I had had in several weeks, and I slept soundly.

I got up around four o'clock, took a shower and shaved, but I was unable to remove the grime from scene paint that had accumulated around my fingernails. I dressed myself in a clean white shirt, my favorite tie with a design of regimental stripes in red and black upon it, and my newly-pressed grey flannel suit.

When I arrived at the theatre around six-thirty, there was a pile of telegrams waiting for me at

the box office.

I went backstage and wished all the cast members good luck. I thanked Sam and Ed and Bob Mitchell for all the work they had done on my show. I said a few words of encouragement to the production staff.

By seven o'clock the audience started to arrive. I stood on the sidewalk in front of the theater waiting for my parents and a party of about thirty of their friends from New Rochelle who had come for the opening. All the women in the party were wearing identical mink capes.

"How are things going, boy?" said my father, affecting an unfamiliar as well as uneasy cordiality toward me.

"All right, I guess," I said. "Keep your fingers crossed."

"Don't be nervous," said my mother.

The performance went smoothly enough , although I noticed there were a few empty seats after the second intermission. The only incident that upset me occurred when I saw one of the men in my parent's party walking down the aisle after one of the intermissions with his arm around Walter Kerr's shoulder. I later found out that this particular friend of his parents had known Walter Kerr since his college days.

After the final curtain had fallen, the critics made a dash for the front exits and were whisked away to their typewriters by a fleet of waiting taxicabs.

A mob of well-wishers quickly clustered around me, shaking my hand and patting me on the back. My mother came up and kissed me on the cheek.

"How did you like it?" I asked.

"I loved every minute of it," said my mother. "Didn't you love it, Alma?" she asked a friend who was standing beside her.

"I loved every minute of it," said Alma.

"Of course, I don't know what the critics will say," my mother felt constrained to add. "If only you would produce something that would appeal to a mass audience."

Later, Sam Cohn and I met backstage.

"How do you think it went?" I asked.

"It can't miss," said Sam.

When the reviews in the morning newspapers came out, they were all bad. The Daily News was the most hostile. In commenting on the large size of the cast, the News critic wrote that by the second night there would probably be more people on-stage than in the audience. The reviews in The New York Times and the Herald-Tribune were milder in tone, but equally unfavorable. It was impossible to run without a good review in at least one of those papers.

"Nobody loves me," I said when I finished reading the reviews.

"There's something I must tell you," said Jim. He had been reading over my shoulder at the opening night party.

"If you must say something, say something kind."

"I suppose this could wait until later, but I would like to get it off my conscience now."

"What is it?"

"I didn't like the play either," said James Price.