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LOU ISMAY

INDEPENDENT STUDY PAPER

by

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An Address to Making Theater Happen

Today, there are as many accepted goals and formats in theatrical expression as there are individuals who assign themselves that task. Moreover, each successive performance tends to be everchanging in quality, effect, and meaning. "Success" in individual and collective performance can only be measured by some enigmatic and personal criterion. The purpose of this essay is to present a guideline of sorts to various forms and ideas in experimental and community-oriented performing arts. I hope this attempt may prove useful in the actual production of theatrical ideas, as it combines my own experience with the suggestions of those more familiar with the art of performance than myself.

Theatre Happenings were a revolutionary kind of art form to emerge from the early sixties. They were abstract, experimental performance, ever unique as their format ~~is~~ usually consisted of very arbitrary and minimalist directions expressing an artistic ideal not unlike that of the abstract expressionists and avant garde musicians of the period. Contrary to appearances, these productions were usually well-rehearsed while allowing individual mood and character, audience response, and the laws of circumstance and physics as well, take over. Happenings are not chaotic or anarchistic in the true sense, for there is a very strong element of control underlying the scenery and movement. However, unlike classical theatre, there is built in space/time for subtleties to develop and innovation to occur totally spontaneously. This is the heart of Happenings. It is a very useful idea to explore.

Communication and expression is more the job of the performers than the director or "creator" who initially outlines the structure that the production is to take. The art of the happening theatre is process; it is adventure, exploratory problem-solving in action, totally abstract in the quest to turn itself into what it really is. There tends to be limited audience participation, although often thought to be the opposite. This is a testament to the degree of control needed in Happening exercises. Chaos is often imminent; perhaps the audience is the element that prevents the entire production from passing into the Twilight Zone.

Here are some examples of Happenings, both in the original state of the art, classic Happenings, if you will, and some more recent, modified forms.

I. Go to a good sized wood with two shopping bags full of toilet paper rolls, about fifteen rolls-no more than 24, (in fact, twenty's plenty) and at least two friends, no more than five, and throw the rolls up into the treetops so that the woods become festooned with toilet paper streamers. Some should go from tree to tree.

-HI Ho Bibbe by Al Hansen (1963)

Here is Al Hansen's comment;

In the first performance the paper was yellow. In the second it was multi-coloured-purple, pink, yellow, white, lavender, blue. In the third it was all white. So far, each performance has been unique and the results, the products of these experiments stand out from each other in such a way that I find, it's hard to pick the one I like best.

II. A can of silver paint must be splashed outside on the floor. Silver City is a palace where everything is either very slow or very fast. It is like a tableau; it has a very special kind of time. It is different the way a memorial or a plaque is different from a church or a union meeting hall. Ritual is inferred but not practiced. Things are silver, Things become silver. A girl lies in bed and writes a letter home. A girl dictates it to her. The bed is elevated and higher in back than in front in a stage prop way. There may be dancers. There are projections. A large form of a man is made of wood and cardboard. Hair is newspaper. Sunglasses.... a giant Andy Warhol is made. There are aircraft sounds. Everyone is covered with news. A couple has a conversation.

- Silver City for Andy Warhol by Al Hansen (1963)

More comment:

Situation forms build an integral. That is to say, when I see something painted silver, I think of Andy Warhol. For instance, the heavy bicycle delivery trucks outside Gristede's anywhere, building fronts painted silver, doors, doorways. Something that is silver or chromium does not invoke him. There is nothing of Andy in coins, faucets, car adornments.

III. Physically express the sensations (i.e. taste sound) of eating a tea cracker. Through dance movement and sound generation clerally demonstrate the transformations of experience. All performers are to choose three movement phrases without hesitation and repeat them sequentially, speeding up or slowingdown or reversing their order at any time. Continue the movement and let the phrases interact between and among performers until all performers have received the influence from another and the total moement has a common/melded impact.

My comment:

This improvisational Happening is an exercise directed by Maude Baum and other members of the Electronic Body Arts Shop designed to introduce dance students to the possibilities of individual improvisation within a seemingly static framework of two parts. Within all of the afore-mentioned productions, time and setting are completely variable.

Happenings are an exploration of the energy of a moment in its most abstract form. The task of performing is specifically that of demonstration and communication. More complicated theatre endeavors may strive to deal with a more subjective idea, a topic, yet will try to retain the purity of an exploratory Happening. These kinds of performances, if successful can carry huge impact in terms of education and social comment, both to performer and audience. Julian Beck and his Living Theatre use this ideal to tremendous advantage in their production of "Paradise Now", a highly emotional demonstration of alternative cultural ideals.

This idea led to the production of "Black Elk Speaks", performed in May of 1976 by the Santigleska Ensemble. About a month and a half before the production date, a group of actors and dancers converged to engage in "theatre games", a kind of exercise based on improvisation, minimal direction, and the idea of semi-abstractedly presenting topic concerns that I mentioned before. It was an educational experience for both actor and dancer to explore the feelings and energy of the moment, as in Happening theatre, but those moments were specifically assigned a topic, a drama, a meaning. For instance, in the course of those games we would examine and interpret the life of an Indian village, the hunt and the harvest, the symbolic center of the universe, a dying nation and its rebirth. Out of these games we educated ourselves enough to try and convey our discoveries to our intended audience. We wanted to show them a special world and invite them into it, teach them about its power and energy, its sound and colour; in other words, we wanted to perform a ritual for them. This then is what we arrive at. Community pageantry and rite, using Happening theatre to more effectively express intent, is indeed an educational medium of a powerful order, simultaneously revolutionary and ancient.

My first experience with this kind of ritual, stylized as it is to satisfy a more prosaic code of expression, was "Black Elk's Dream", taken from the book Black Elk Speaks. It, being the story of a Sioux medicine

medecine man and his power vision, is a story of unusual magic and lends itself to ritual performance. The dream is source in itself for rites performed by Black Elk's tribe upon his direction.

I enjoyed the work, the dances, the rehearsals, the exercises, of which there were many. I did have a problem when faced with the religious significance of the piece, however, I could meditate on the native spirituality expressed in the piece, but I often wondered whether we, a mixed group of middle-class Americans with sympathy but no true understanding of the American Indian, were not committing a sacrilege of some sort. This vision is held to be highly sacred among the traditional Indian people. As I worked, I began to know my own heart and believe that what we were trying to do was valuable to us as performers and as a communication to our audience; that we were doing no overt harm and even benefit to the culture of the Indian. Now I feel that given our accumulated talents, we could have presented a more appropriate piece related to native Americans. Our performance of Black Elk's vision was somewhat unsuccessful because the members performing were not religious persons and thus the flow and impact of the piece was not carried off.

It is possible to construct theatre with very little experience and structure to it. as evidenced by our performance. Neither of these qualities necessitates a good performance, but this is not to say that they are of no value. Primarily, I feel you must work from one solid idea with one solid committed group of people, and work, work hard from within that group, using the special talents of each to express that idea. Everyone must have a grasp of the idea, and be contributing to its success. This will give a sense of unity to the group. Each group of performers will combine their own particular elements into a special whole with a personality as unique as any of its components.

Some good books to look into for suggestions as to producing these kind of theatre experiences:

A PRIMER OF HAPPENINGS and TIME/SPACE ART

by Al Hansen, Something Else Press, N.Y. 1965

PARADISE NOW by Judith Malina and Julian Beck

Random House, N.Y. 1971

COMMUNITY DRAMA and PAGEANTRY by Mary Porter Beegle and Jack Randall Crawford, New Haven, Yale Univ. Press, 1916

THE THEATRE OF MIXED MEANS by Richard Kostelantz
Dial Press, N.Y. 1968