

# PORTFOLIO

THE SEARCH FOR A NEW THEATRE



PROLOGUE  
“GROTOWSKI’S COMING!”  
(written circa 1970)

I suppose the most important theatrical event in recent years was the arrival of Jerzy Grotowski and his Polish Laboratory Theatre. At least, that’s what the Village Voice said. Also the New York Times. And when the Village Voice and the New York Times both say the same thing, it is an historical event.

I first learned about this Polish director early last year when a friend announced, after a significant pause, “Grotowski’s coming!” I had never heard of Grotowski, but I was impressed by the sound of it. (Try it yourself. Turn to a friend, preferably not one connected with the theatre, and whisper, in solemn tones, “Grotowski’s coming!” Believe me, he - or she - will be impressed.)

But that was just the beginning. Grotowski, it appeared, is the new “god” of the theatre. The most important innovator since Brecht. Okay. That sounded good. Peter Brook had based his staging of “Marat/Sade upon exercises developed under the tutelage of Grotowski. Well, I loved “Marat/Sade,” so I was more impressed than ever. The Open Stage, whose production of “The Serpent” was the most exciting theatre experience I have had in years, was also under the influence of Grotowski. Marvelous! Let’s see. What else? He had written a book which was (at that time) only available at the Drama Book Shop and which cost eleven dollars! For a paperback edition! Wow!

Then, to top the whole thing off, I discovered that during their limited stay in this country, Mr. G. and his Polish company would limit their audience to one hundred people a night! That did it. I mean, I’m as much of a snob as the next person, and if there were only going to be a hundred people a

night, I was going to be one of them. I wrote for my tickets immediately. Five months in advance. Before there was an ad in the paper. And I paid the eleven bucks and purchased Grotowski's book "Towards A Poor Theatre." Snappy title. (And ironic, considering the cost of the book.) And then I waited.

Finally, it began to happen. Grotowski had arrived. The word was out. He was here. In New York. In rehearsal. But wait. Consternation. Change. Performances to be moved from the Brooklyn Academy of Music to a small church in Greenwich Village. All right. Better. More convenient. But - wait again. Performance time changed. Disregard time printed on tickets. Performance will take place an hour earlier. Or later. (I've forgotten now.) Meanwhile, the machinery of the mass media is hard at work. Grotowski's picture appears on the front page of the Sunday Drama section of the Times. Very impressive. ( Dark glasses. Sort of a Peter Lorre type.) Plus which, there is a long interview. And a separate article besides that. And a slew of letters in the Drama Mail Bag.

And wait, it's not over yet. A new announcement. Grotowski does not want to allow one hundred people into his theatre. That is too many! Ninety people. That is the limit. The extra ten people would destroy the whole thing. Besides, there are no seats for them. (Most unfortunate, since the ten superfluous people have already purchased their tickets, most of them many months in advance.)

Well, by now I'm in a sweat. I've got to see Grotowski! I'll die if I don't see Grotowski! They've got to let me in! I'll get there early! I'll stand in line. Anything! Anything! Oh, yes - my God, it is a revolution in the theatre! Keep the audience small. Make the seats uncomfortable. Change the venue without telling anyone. Change the performance time. Don't let people in, even if they have paid for their tickets in advance. This must be the Holy Theatre! How else could you explain it?

At long last, the night arrives. My wife and I go. We go early. We do stand in line. We actually make it inside. Not everyone is so lucky. Outside we can hear angry patrons storming the front door as if it were the Bastille. And, inside, look around, what an audience! Hal Prince is there. So is Jerome Robbins. And Estelle Parsons. And up there, in the tiny balcony, discreetly shadowed, is Barbra Streisand with the Prime Minister of Canada! Where is President Nixon, I wonder? Where is David Merrick? Where is the Pope?

And then. - finally! After all these months. The show itself. No. “show” isn’t the right word. What? The “performance”? The “production”? The “experience”? Yes. The experience. The Grotowski Experience.

What can I tell you? It was dull. It was only an hour long. But it was dull. First of all, it was in Polish. All right. That I expected. If you’re from Poland, you have every right to perform in Polish. No matter. I had seen the Greek National Theatre in 1953 and I had been moved to tears though I do not speak Greek. I had seen the funny French production of “The Three Musketeers.” I had seen, just the year before, the Yugoslav Theatre do “King Ubu,” and that was in Croatian! So in the case of Grotowski, the problem wasn’t the fact that it was in Polish. It was Polish. It was foreign. (To me.) It was neurotic. (To me.) It was dull. (To me.) It was a very small experience.

And so finally we come to the point of this wordy, wandering piece. What is Grotowski up to, anyway? What is the “Holy Theatre”? What is its power upon people? Upon me, for that matter. Why did I wait so eagerly for his arrival? And why am I so bitterly disappointed by the experience? The answer, I think, is simple. People are ready for some sort of change in the theatre. Everyone is eager for a sense of purpose, for something beyond the often shallow show-biz of Broadway. Everyone longs for a theatre of commitment. Of ritual. Of revelation. In short, a “holy” theatre.

To Grotowski this seems to mean a theatre limited to a handful of spectators with performances that are turned “in” instead of “out.” No reaching out to the audience. No applause. No “effects.” Performances that are pinched and pale. Bloodless. Chalk-white. And though this form of “holiness” may be momentarily fascinating, it soon winds up being dull. And if something has to be dull to be holy, then I don’t need to go to the theatre for that. Too many churches, alas, can offer that experience every Sunday.

No. A “popular” theatre. That’s what we need. A vulgar theatre. A theatre with applause. With songs and dances. And naked girls (and boys). And clowns. And “schtick.” The theatre of the streets. (Keep ‘em entertained or you’re out on your arse.) I believe in all of that. I honor it. And yet I also believe that this “holy” theatre and this “rough” theatre can be joined together into a harmonious whole.

So this is where I am, ten years after “The Fantasticks.” My dream: to marry the holy theatre with the popular one. To put the two together and see if it works. To supply the spectator with “thrills and chills” and raucous laughter and gasps of terror and sentimental tears and sexual arousal - and compassion. And then, to add to that a sense of formality and ritual and a deepened awareness of the holiness of life itself. Not like Grotowski. Nor like the desperate frivolity of many Broadway musicals. A new theatre. An old theatre, actually. A theatre at once divine and vulgar. Why should we accept less? For that is what we are, all of us, when you get right down to it: part god and part low comic. It can be achieved. And when it does happen again, the theatre will return to its proper place as brothel/temple, a home for vulgarity and holy joy.

## PART ONE GETTING STARTED

In 1967 Harvey and I had “I Do! I Do!” running on Broadway with Mary Martin and Robert Preston and “The Fantasticks” running off Broadway and being produced by literally thousands of theatres around the world. We had money. Money saved up and money pouring in. So we decided to find a space and open a theatre workshop where we could attempt to create original musicals in new and previously untried forms. Our motives were not particularly noble (to expand the horizons of the American musical, etc.) but simply to find a place where we could do our best and most exciting work. “The Fantasticks” had broken almost every rule of the musical theatre of the time and it had proven, to our amazement, to be an astounding success. So, to mis-quote a lyric from the wonderful and under-appreciated “Flora, The Red Menace:” We are not Rodgers & Hammerstein. Rodgers & Hammerstein are Rodgers and Hammerstein.” We wanted to find a home for our particular dreams and talents.

Our first job was to find the space. Actually, our first job was to find someone who could find the space. As luck would have it, our friend Bob Gold was interested. He and I had been pals since our time together in the Counter Intelligence Corps. Later, he and Harvey and I (plus a few others) had been roommates during our early days in New York. Though basically a painter, Bob had an interest in, and a talent for, a number of subjects. He was a championship marksman, a dynamite tennis player, an early Zen enthusiast (who studied under the famed Dr. Suzuki), a skilled carpenter and, most important of all, he was knowledgeable about financial matters. Ever since he assisted Word Baker in the ground-breaking restaging of “The Crucible,” Bob had begun to take an interest in theatre. As co-producer, he helped Ellis Rabb and Rosemary Harris form their very successful Association of Professional Artists (APA) and then he became co-owner of the Sullivan Street Playhouse where “The Fantasticks” was first performed (and where it ran for the next 42 years).

After a long and intense search, Bob found the perfect place for us. A six story building on 47<sup>th</sup> Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, right in the heart of the Broadway theatre (and one block from Joe Allen's Restaurant). At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the building had been a chapel for immigrant weddings, so the first and second floors had been made into one large room, with high ceilings just perfect for a small theatre. It had a reception space in the front, a basement for dressing rooms, offices for Harvey, Bob and me, and at the top of the building another large room which we used for creating costumes, props, masks and graphics.

Bob made the arrangements and then, pretty much by himself, he built the modified Elizabethan stage that Harvey had designed, complete with the traditional "inner-above" and "inner-below," flanked on either side by steps and platforms. It was to be the same basic unit for all of the shows we created there, just like Shakespeare and the Globe. Harvey (see photo) put on his overalls and climbed up the scaffolding to paint the interior "raw umber," his favorite color. Bob Gold contacted a theatre on Long Island which was going out of business and purchased their lighting equipment, which he installed. And then suddenly it was done. PORTFOLIO! Our theatre! We could hardly believe it was true.

When the interior was finished, we did not open for business. Not right away. In fact, not for a long time. First we assembled a group of young talented musical theatre performers, people we had worked with in "The Fantasticks" or "110 In The Shade," and began a series of classes and experiments. Bob hired Hovey Burgess from the circus to give lessons in juggling, stilt-walking and acrobatics. He hired Serena, a noted belly dancer, to give classes to both women and men in that divine (and demanding) art.

Twice weekly Harvey and I pursued our experiments in theatrical ritual and low clown art. We always did a warm up (one that Hovey had taught us) with Harvey accompanying. Then we progressed to improvisations, often with masks which Harvey had made. Finally, at the end of each session, we sat in a circle on the floor (covered for the occasion with a large rubber mat) and drank red wine and talked, sometimes about theatre but often just about our lives.

I know, I know. It sounds pretty artsy-fartsy, but it was also fun. It was specially fun when Harvey was in the full swing of creation. There was a small balcony at the back of the theatre and during this phase of the workshop it was Harvey's space, complete with an electronic keyboard (what was then called an RMI), rattles, drums of all sizes and shapes, bells, gongs, and bamboo sticks. Harvey was, as they used to say in Texas, happy as a pig in shit. During the course of the movement improvs, he would compose wildly and play the keyboard and bang the drums and sometimes just get up and dance around the balcony, clapping his hands or beating against the wall.

Our costume designer, an eccentric genius named Charles Blackburn, had amassed a glorious pile of "stuff" from his previous productions, primarily at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton. He had a massive mouse head with a diamond tiara. Also a full gorilla outfit with jeweled earrings. If we needed some interesting clothing for a show, Charlie would rip open a bolt of fabric, tear it apart, sew it back together, then splatter it with paint and add a spangle or two.

By a stroke of good fortune, there was a small magic and novelty store just down the street from Portfolio from which Harvey purchased an enormous stack of faceless white masks (and I acquired a basket full of whoopie cushions). Taking the masks back to our costume shop, Harvey began to



improvise. For one mask he took two small styrofoam cups, cut off the ends and pasted them on for eyes. For another he glued two small whisk brooms on the sides for ears. On yet another, he pasted dozens of buttons of different sizes and colors. On some animal masks he wrapped layer after layer of pages from the New York Times. The walls of the costume shop quickly became an enormous collage of masks and costumes and graphics and exotic musical instruments from around the world.

## PART TWO THE SHOWS

We created three musicals and one revue during our time at Portfolio. One of our goals was to only do originals. This was ambitious, but it was also daunting. Almost all musicals are based on other sources, just as almost all of Shakespeare's plays are based on other sources. One of the reasons I found myself drawn to the American musical in the first place was its uncanny resemblance to Shakespeare: the use of poetic language, the soliloquies (songs) sharing inner thoughts and feelings with the audience, the multiplicity of scenes, and the sheer theatrical schmaltz. Shakespeare's job was not to create original stories but to take stories and send them soaring into new life, enhanced and elevated by the music of his verse and the theatricality of his presentations and, most of all, by his brilliant perceptions of the human experience. Comparing his works with the originals upon which they were based is mind blowing. It is, literally, the difference between life and death. It can, and should, be the same with musicals. Looking back on it, I am proud that we were able to create three originals, but the truth is that if we had based them on other sources we would have been able to do twice as many.

The first show we created was "Celebration." It was based on the earliest theatrical source I could find: a Sumerian Winter Solstice ritual in which an old man and a young boy compete for the hand of a beautiful maiden. Taking this basic plot, we set the story on New Year's Eve in a Tim Burton sort of city and we turned the characters into contemporary arch-types. The

old man (Mr. Rich) typifies all the misgivings that the youth culture at the time felt about the previous generation. (“Never trust anyone over 30.”) The young boy (Orphan) is the ultimate flower child, almost ridiculously naive. The girl (Angel) is a teenybopper dreaming of being a celebrity “like the people in the magazines.” And the narrator (Potemkin) is a dropout, an ex-magician, ex-priest, reduced to begging and living by his wits. As for the chorus (the Revelers) they are street people - trying to find a little diversion in the middle of a cold winter night.

As Potemkin says mid-way in the show: “What’s going on here? Is this a comedy or isn’t it? One thing I can tell you. Whatever it is, it’s very symbolic.” And that it is. But it is also very funny. In fact, I believe it the funniest show we ever wrote. The score is wonderful, some of Harvey’s most melodious and inventive music. (The orchestra is made up entirely of percussion instruments.) The original cast album was re-mastered and re-released last year by Harbinger Records along with a 30 page booklet filled with photographs and recollections about the Broadway production (available through Amazon). If you check this website you will see that it also contains a brief video of me doing a couple of scenes from “Celebration.”

By the way, “Celebration” was, as far as I know, the first “workshop” to precede a Broadway production. But I want to stress that, unlike “A Chorus Line” and others that followed, none of the musicals we developed at Portfolio involved any improvs or other writing contributions by the actors.

Our second show, “Philemon,” was conceived to be, like “Celebration,” a mixture of the “holy theatre” and the “popular theatre,” but, though often comedic, it was basically a much more serious project. At the end of World War II, as I was entering college, I was overwhelmed by the images of the Nazi death camps that were just being released to the public, and I thought

to myself: if I had been there, in Germany, would I have had the courage to protest? Many years later I came across a passage in Allardyce Nicoll's book "Masks, Mimes and Miracles" about a Roman clown during the reign of the emperor Diocletian who impersonated a Christian leader and slowly turned into the man he was impersonating. These two things were the beginning of "Philemon."

Harvey and I worked on it for a long time. Before arriving at our final version, we produced three separate and quite different workshop versions. In fact, we did so many that our friend Jay Harnick suggested we call our theatre the New York Philemonic. As with "Celebration," Harbinger Records has recently re-mastered and re-released the original cast album containing an extensive booklet detailing the transitions as the show developed as well as numerous photos and even cut numbers from the earlier versions. (Also available through Amazon.)

"Philemon" finally opened in January of 1975, and to quote Luisa in "The Fantasticks:" "Happy ending!" We had a wonderful cast headed by Dick Latessa as the clown Cockian, a role for which he won both an Obie and the Outer Critics Circle Award as Best Actor in a Musical, and the show itself won the Outer Critics Circle Award as Best Musical of the Year. The reviews were all terrific (very rare for us). The production sold out its limited run immediately. Then when it closed, the producer/director Norman Lloyd snapped up the show - cast, musicians, costumes, props and staging - and presented it in a beautiful rendition for PBS's Hollywood Television Theatre. as with "Celebration," there is a video section in this website where I discuss "Philemon" and show a few clips from the television production.

"The Bone Room." What was it Winston Churchill said about Russia? "It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." That is pretty much what I feel about "The Bone Room." It is a mystery to me where it came from. It is a mystery how it developed. And it is a mystery how I feel about it now and what (if anything) should I do with it.

When it was presented at Portfolio, it was blasted by the critics. They hated it. It wasn't the cast. The three members of the cast were all wonderful. The direction by John Schak was powerful. The songs were tuneful and funny. No. It was me. The show was sub-titled: "A middle age musical about male menopause." And somehow the story had become all tied up and twisted with my life. The run at Portfolio over, I put "The Bone Room" away and tried to forget it, which was strange for me. Usually I keep plugging away - sometimes forty or fifty years - until I get it right. And yet. And yet.

People kept discovering the songs and singing them, especially a very gory and very funny song about embalming. And the photos. I kept coming across the photos in some stray box or file. The story is framed as a lecture at the Museum of Natural History. A man and a woman lecture about "the middle-aged male," showing slides and transforming themselves to portray the people in his life. Eventually, as the story gets weirder, they morph into Death and a Maiden and form a menage-a-trois with our middle-aged hero as his mind explodes and the music rages while we see slide after slide of galaxies and single cells and image after image suggesting the innate connection between large and small, earthly and celestial, life and death.

A few years back Mr. Katsuta, who has translated and staged ten of my musicals, got my permission to do "The Bone Room" in Tokyo. And it went well, especially with the critics, who praised it as unique and "ahead of its time." The York Theatre in Manhattan has been asking me for years to let them at least do a staged reading. And Harbinger Records wants to make a cast album. I don't know. I have to think about it. But before I do, I would like to take you on a journey - a strange little voyage - into the dark and mysterious vortex from which "The Bone Room" emerged.

Many years ago, in a galaxy far away, by which I mean New York in the early 1960's, we used to play some sort of game called "Ratfink." I think

it was a card game, but I'm not even sure of that. We played with ex-roommate Robert Benton and with his friend, the great illustrator, Milton Glazer. (Just to drop a name or two to liven things up.) For some reason, Harvey and I decided that it was a funny name and would be a great title for a musical. (You have to remember we were the people who had called the original version of "The Fantasticks," "Joy Comes to Dead Horse.") Then, to turn simple folly into downright madness, we decided to write a musical to fit the title. (Needless to say, this is not something I would recommend.)

I had been madly in love with a young Quaker girl who had a way of seeing the world that I had never even imagined - expanding (and inverting) the senses. As El Gallo says in "The Fantasticks" (in tribute to her) "See it with your ears: the cool, green breathing of the leaves, and hear it with the inside of your hand: the soundless sound of shadows flicking light." She was a painter and it was her dream to get a job at the Museum of Natural History helping paint and create the dioramas. Alas, I lost her to another man, but I had become very familiar with, and fascinated by, the Museum in the brief time that we were together.

Somehow this all pulled together to give us a setting and a plot. A man, now older and immensely wealthy, decides to buy the Museum of Natural History and find an innocent orphan girl to put there to replace the love of his life he lost in his youth. What can I tell you? It was insane. We came up with some funny (and even trenchant) scenes and songs, but it was still insane. Harvey was a composer and illustrator (a great one) but he had no experience in putting together a plot or developing characters. I had a background in drama, but as an actor and director, not as a playwright. Somewhere along the line I discovered that I had a gift for dialogue (and lyrics) but I was missing out on the all important second syllable in the word "playwright." Like "wheelwright," it implies a kind of meticulous

craft that was foreign to my nature. Take Richard Nash, for example (author of “The Rainmaker” and countless other plays). When he wasn’t writing plays, he made furniture. He conceived, then designed, measured and constructed tables and chairs. If I tried to make a chair, there would be a lawsuit right as soon as somebody tried to sit in it.

So - we had an unbelievable premise, a questionable setting and two people who had no background in the craft of playwriting. But on we forged, misled by the fact that many of the scenes and all of the songs we were creating were, in fact, quite tasty - funny, sexy, even adventurous. I remember that by the time we went over to London in 1961 to do “The Fantasticks,” we played some of the songs for the cast there, including “The Postcard Song” and “Under The Tree.”

Fortunately for us (and the world), Fate kept interrupting our progress. First, we got the chance to do the score for the Broadway production of “The Rainmaker,” called “110 In The Shade,” which took a couple of years to write and cast and stage and take out of town and finally to open in New York. Then, as we were ready to return to “Ratfink,” Gower Champion, a hero of ours, said he wanted to do a new musical with us. He had optioned a book called “The Street Where The Heart Lies,” which he gave to us and asked us to explore as a possible musical.

Harvey had rented a villa in Italy for a year (see section on “Porto Santo Stefano”) and I joined him there as we began exploring Gower’s book. We had written a few songs when we got a long distance call from New York (nothing notable these days, but a big deal back then). Gower told us that David Merrick had taken an option on the two character play “The Fourposter” and Gower wanted us to make it into a musical for Mary Martin and Robert Preston. Which we did. Which took another two years. At which time we are up to the beginning of this chapter. We had money. We created Portfolio. We wrote “Celebration” and “Philemon” and now we were ready, at long last, to have a go at “Ratfink.”

The first thing we did was to change the name to "The Bone Room." The second thing was to throw out the original story (while trying to keep some of the songs). The plot now was to be about a very average middle-aged man who worked at the Museum of Natural History, gluing bones for the dioramas. Like "Philemon" before it, we did several workshops at Portfolio as we tried to find a plot and a resolution to the story. Then finally we opened it to the public as part of a season of four new musicals at Portfolio. And, as Forrest Gump might add: "That's all I have to say about that."

"Portfolio Revue." This was the first of the shows we did in our "Season of Four" at Portfolio. With Harvey at the piano and me narrating, along with David Cryer, Katherine King Segal and Jeannie Lucus performing, it traced the history of our work as writers and introduced some songs from the new musicals we were about to unveil. It got wonderful notices and then later, when we revised it and presented it at York as "The Show Goes On," it got even better notices. It is available, in its entirety, in a cast album CD released by DRG Records.

Before I bring this chapter to a close, I would like to pay a brief (but heartfelt) tribute to the people who helped make Portfolio possible. First or all, the actors, the wonderful singing, belly dancing, stilt-walking, mask wearing actors who joined in our creations and brought our feverish dreams to life. Then to our choreographers: Vernon Lusby, who had been Agnes De Mille's assistant and who contributed a wealth of spectacular invention to the dances for "Celebration." Finally to Janet Watson, who choreographed "Philemon" and the "Four At Portfolio" season. With her special gift, she made it possible for non-dancers to dance, and for all movement to grow, easily and organically, from the confines of the story being told. In addition to all that, she also became my wife and the mother of our two wonderful sons, Sam and Mike.

Beginning with “Philemon” and continuing through “Four At Portfolio,” we had three incredible musicians who not only played the shows but joined forces with Harvey to create the orchestrations: Ken Collins, Penna Rose and Bill Grossman. All three were brilliant pianists, but all three also played a wide variety of other instruments, including synthesizer, French horn, guitar, soprano recorder, chimes and all sorts of percussion, including kettle drums. Together, working with Harvey, they turned our little three-piece band into a full-sized orchestra. For those who might be interested in how this was done, there is a fascinating article by Penna Rose in the newly released Harbinger Records release of “Philemon.”

At about the same time as the musicians, Portfolio acquired two “apprentices,” Drew Katzman and John Schak. They did everything. I mean EVERYTHING. And then, as time went on, they became more and more involved in production. Drew took over the role of Servillus in “Philemon” when the original actor had to withdraw. John directed “The Bone Room.” After Portfolio closed, he became Harvey’s personal secretary and in spite of his own busy career as actor, director and professor (at the University of Michigan), John continued to work for Harvey part time until Harvey’s death. Then he continued for two more years assembling and preserving Harvey’s huge mass of music, correspondence and artwork.

A FINAL WORD  
“THE CIRCLE IN THE SAND”

COME JOIN US IN THE SEARCH  
FOR A NEW THEATRE

POPULAR MUSICALS  
IN EXPERIMENTAL FORMS



SMALLER CASTS  
CHEAPER TICKETS

A CHALLENGE AND A CHANCE  
FOR AUDIENCES AND ACTORS,  
WORKING TOGETHER, TO CREATE  
A NEW AND ANCIENT ART

AND REMEMBER  
YOU DON'T NEED EXPENSIVE REAL ESTATE  
OR FANCY SETS AND COSTUMES  
ALL YOU NEED IS A SPACE  
AND A VISION

GOD BLESS!

Tom Jones