Prospects

New England, 1980

Late winter and early spring are frenetic. The new year blossoms with opportunity. In addition to staﬀ jobs at Long Wharf Theatre, Joanna and I both take on side gigs as 1980 unfolds. Joanna is engaged as the director for a college production called *Home Fires* which I quickly rename *Home Fries.* And I take on a freelance design job for an amateur production of *Same Time, Next Year*.

The experience is harrowing. *Same Time* is a newly released romantic comedy that totally drains my energy and requires an eleven-day stay in Boston. I’m not sure how the producer found me or if I made any money—or how I talked my boss, Dave, into letting me take this leave of absence. The episode must have been gruesome because I have next to no recollection of it. Three colleagues from LWT come up for the first performance. I have no playbill, no review, just odd remnants of a model I built at the time and a vague memory of a young, cheerful producer who made it happen.

I return to New Haven just in time for the opening night party for *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* This rendition of the well-known play is unique. It reunites the comedy team of Mike Nichols and Elaine May, who have not performed together for years. They apply their wry humor to the famous lines. The revival draws Pulitzer-winning playwright Edward Albee to the final rehearsals. And pre-show publicity assures we’ll have sell-out crowds of celebrity gawkers.

But, contrary to the traditional “show must go on” ethos, the performance schedule of *Virginia Woolf* is delayed by two weeks as Nichols battles pneumonia. This disruption ripples through every nook and cranny of Long Wharf. Performances are cancelled. Rehearsals for other shows are disrupted. The main stage is dark for many nights. I overhear someone in LWT’s top management say, “… we will never starf\*\*\* again,” but I am doubtful.

The season is wrapping up for both the main and second stages. Joanna and I are looking to the future in a number of ways. Once again we visit our friend Petey in New York City.

I speak with the scenic designer, Lester Polakov, about attending his renowned Studio of Stage Design school and am immediately accepted into the program. Lester is getting on in years and probably can use the cash . As aesthetically pleasing as life in the theatre can be, for many it is not financially rewarding. With rare exceptions, actors, directors, set designers, and stage monkeys are always looking for their next job.

The LWT stage crew mounts the final production of the season, *Cyrano de Bergerac.* There is a large cast, and the stage set is designed to feature the actors rather than a specific architectural environment. It is mid-May and as stage hands, we are basically “polishing doorknobs” on the *Cyrano* set while packing up the scene shop for summer.

I reconsider a recent decision to move to New York jobless. For the first time in four years, I have not pursued a position with a summer stock company. During one of the final tech rehearsals for *Cyrano*, I seek out LWT’s executive director, Edgar Rosenblum, and tell him that Joanna and I might be interested in participating in next season’s cross-country tour. I have previously given notice of my departure from LWT to pursue other things.

The prospect of the package of an experienced, apparently harmonious couple appeals to Edgar. He extends us an oﬀer. We accept without really understanding what we are signing up for. But we depart for warm weather diversions and being able to tell family and friends that we are gainfully employed … and then immediately proceed to take the entire summer oﬀ.

As it turns out, we can use the time. Joanna’s family is staging a diﬀerent kind of theatrical event. The *El Dorado News-Times* in her Arkansas hometown features the following announcement around the time we depart New Haven for points south:

“Mr. and Mrs. Robert R. Risser announce the engagement of their daughter Joanna Rene to Conway Walter Hunter III of Atlanta, Georgia. The bride-elect is currently employed at Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut. The prospective groom is also employed at Long Wharf Theatre.”

As always, the stage monkey gets second billing. She’s “elect” and I’m “prospective.”