Time to Tour

Cross-country, 1980

I return to New Haven once again in early autumn, now with a pretty bride at my side. Seasonal colors are in full flood. Students are returning to the Yale campus and other Ivies nearby. This theatre town that was once our home will no longer be. It’s an odd sensation. Joanna and I check into an inexpensive hotel.

“How many nights?” the desk clerk wants to know.

“Not sure,” I respond.

“We prefer cash.”

“But she’s my wife, sir. Honest. And … well, we live here, sort of. We both have jobs at Long Wharf. The theatre,” I try to explain.

“Uh huh. Those people come and go. Check out is at eleven o’clock A.M., if you’re still here. We prefer cash. Up front.” What a classy life I now live.

It’s been a sun-stroked, long-winded, gala summer. Lots of travel. Lots of friends. Lots of family. A wedding. Ours. But now it’s time to get back to work and hit the road. We are here to lead the charge for the Long Wharf Theatre on Tour program. I have graduated to the position of touring technical director. Joanna is one of two assistant stage managers. Her new role comes with a broadly coveted and professionally respected Actors’ Equity Association membership card. Members are commonly called Equity players and workers. I receive a pat on the back and a cheery wish for “good luck” from my scene shop pals.

Tour-worthy settings for two productions have been built in my absence. *The Lion in Winter* by playwright James Goldman is set in the year 1183 at Christmastime in England during the reign of Henry II. The film version of the story released in 1968 earns Katherine Hepburn an Oscar for Best Actress. Our scenery and props for *Lion* are sparse, focusing on powerful confrontations within a royal family searching for the successor to an aging king.

The other play on our tour, Noël Coward’s *Private Lives*, is quite different. It is a frothy comedy of manners set in France in the 1930s. The set is much more elaborate. Each production oﬀers its own challenges in terms of setup, takedown, lighting, sound design, and prop support. And both must fit in one eighteen-wheel semi-tractor-trailer truck, which seems long when it’s empty but offers no extra room when loaded.

This is a totally new, untested venture for LWT and I am among the most experienced “touring professionals” in our company. Our playbill states that Long Wharf Theatre is “one of the most prestigious resident theatre companies in America and this is the most extensive national tour ever undertaken by such a theatre.”

Our itinerary includes thirty-one states in eight months. I am uniquely qualified to lead our technical team across the country because earlier this year, I helped lead the transport of an LWT production to an adjoining state (New York) for six performances in conjunction with the Lake Placid Olympic Games. The transport, load-in, setup, staging, strike, and return of that one-stop, bumpy, lightly attended “touring” production makes me one of LWT’s most veteran “roadies.” We are painfully raw. Once we hit the road, we are all in this together. But strictly speaking, LWT on Tour is actually composed of two separate and interdependent groups.

Performers are generally called the “company.” They travel together in the company bus and their schedules are determined principally by performance times. The performers and stage managers all hold Equity credentials.

The other tour members compose the “tech crew.” These professionals, like me, are responsible for the show elements not related to performance and include electricians, props, and wardrobe pros, as well as the technical director. In most nationally touring productions, these positions also require union cards, typically IATSE memberships, but not in our case. Once again, Joanna outranks me on the playbill.

Three more individuals, the “drivers,” complete our tour family. The eighteen-wheeler filled with scenery, the company bus, and the tech crew minivan all require professional drivers. Each vehicle will make its own way to the various venues and arrive at their appropriate times.

The company is composed of twenty-one uniquely qualified people. Each is a colorful character or they would not be doing this. We hope to get to know each other well because we’ll be working together for nearly a year. We are ready to hit the road.

Technically speaking, I lead the tech crew. I am responsible for unloading, load-ins, setup, changeovers, and load-outs of all the physical elements required to stage our two shows. Practically speaking, my influence is limited since each individual on the tech team has their own domain. Each is highly capable and totally committed to their role. And each is a strong personality. It takes a bit of time for the techies to get to know the performers and their various managers but the tech crew bonds right away.

Master Electrician Dan Clayman makes sure the audience sees what happens on stage. He is an artist at his craft and a consummate technician. He sees the humor in almost everything and is quick with a funny line.

Brian “Friar” Tuck is the assistant electrician, primarily responsible for mounting and maintaining heavy light sources in a multitude of diﬀerent locations. He smiles a lot, particularly when installing heavy lighting instruments in awkward situations. Or is that grin a grimace?

Wardrobe SupervisorMarcia Cohen clings to the coattails and hemlines of the cast and precisely maintains every detail of costumes, hairdos, and makeup. She is modest and quietly cordial. Maybe this is why she rides with the cast in the company bus rather than in the motor home with the rowdy crew.

And then there’s me, the technical director, Conway (Chip) Hunter, the lead “hammer and nails” guy. When everything goes right technically, typically no one notices—or each participant takes quiet credit. But, if something goes wrong at load-in, setup, changeover, load-out or (God forbid) during a performance, everybody notices and the tech director gets to fix the problem. Plus assure everyone it will never, ever, EVER, happen again.

Small set pieces packed in an assortment of boxes and crates are capably managed, repaired, touched up by the props supervisor, Andria Iovino. Ando, or, as I prefer to call her, Miss Doe, is a rapid-moving, quick-talking, enterprising problem solver. Just before the curtain goes up, she dashes around the set as though putting out fires. She always moves quickly until she’s relaxing. Then she really settles in. It’s best at that time to approach her with a stemmed glass of Chianti or Nebbiolo in each hand. Miss Doe and my Joanna become instant best friends. At the end of any theatre load-out, they are likely found together sitting on road boxes evaluating performances of the rest of us techies near the rear stage door.

Fresh fall air sweeps in from New Haven Harbor on the day we set out. Yalies are returning to campus nearby. Loaded trucks filled with animal carcasses shift gears noisily as they depart the parking lot we share. It’s day one of the tour. After lots of good wishes for success and salutes from those left behind, the tech crew departs.

Our first stop is Danbury High School in Danbury, Connecticut, only thirty-five miles away. It’s a nightmare. A local crew, composed of high school students and itinerant hired hands, helps us unload and set up in a space called the Fishbowl. Designer John Jensen continues to paint details on the semi-regal *Lion in Winter* set as we erect it for the first time on an unfamiliar stage. There is a two-hour technical rehearsal, which is not nearly enough time to execute cues and sort out unexpected problems. My so-called polished technical crew is dismayed and starts snarling at one another. But somehow the curtain goes up, actors take the stage, and there is applause. We make it happen.

Greenwich High School in Greenwich, Connecticut, is the second “shakedown” stop intended to let all of us get our collective acts together. Only forty-five miles from our previous stop, this venue tests us even more. We will have another two-hour technical rehearsal after oﬀload and setup for our first performance of *Private Lives*. When the curtain comes down, we execute our first changeover going from *Private Lives* to *Lion*. The local house tech crew is from New York City, so, even though they are not union members, they are far more eﬃcient than our previous high school crew.

This is my first true trial by fire. I learn during setup that we have left an important set piece in Greenwich. This is my responsibility and I must rapidly improvise a solution. The between-acts set change from Act I to Act II in *Private Lives* takes twenty minutes, far longer than we or the audience expect. And following the strike of the *Private Lives* set and the initial setup for *Lion*, I discover that I have missed the center stage “spike mark” for the *Lion* set by four feet! This would not be a big deal if the stage were large but it’s not. I receive a brutal tongue lashing from one of my colleagues but, again, we improvise.

The “no big deal” acceptance of this irregularity by the cast is a huge relief. They take the fact that every set piece is far oﬀ center with a *c’est la vie* attitude. After load-out, and into the next day, which is a 230-mile travel day to Dover, Delaware, I draft a detailed, itemized packing chart for every stage element with instructions on how it is to be loaded into the truck. This is a valuable exercise and a priceless tool for the rest of the tour. I wish my boss at LWT had known to insist I do this before departure but Dave had his hands full with other matters. This is the beginning of a collection of lessons learned that I carry forth and share with others over the years. This diagram remains in my permanent theatre collection.

The cast and crew depart each venue separately but during this introductory phase of the tour, I begin to meet the actors. Each of the nine players in our company comes with impressive credentials.

Tall, square-jawed Rex Robbins, a touring veteran, has appeared on Broadway opposite Carol Channing, Angela Lansbury, and Al Pacino. He contributed to Long Wharf’s Tony-winning production, *The Changing Room*, as a member of the cast in 1973. His female foil in both shows is coy, demure, elegant, Barbara Sohmers, a native New Yorker who hit the road in early years, ending up in Paris performing in multiple languages on stage and in film.

Others in the cast are aspiring, rising stars. Henry Stram, a Juilliard School graduate and son of legendary NFL coach Hank Stram, is known for Shakespearean roles, and he toured for a year with John Houseman’s troupe, The Acting Company. Donna Snow and Bara-Christin Hansen are building careers in the classics oﬀ-Broadway and in regional theatre, rubbing shoulders with notorious actors and directors along the way.

Scott Waters, David Combs, Peter Webster, and Dugg Smith complete the casts of our shows. Each touts major credits oﬀ-Broadway, touring and appearing in regional theatres across the country. Each also comes with common goals: (a) work for a full year in familiar roles without needing to audition for a new one; (b) get a life-lock grip on an Actors’ Equity card; and (c) come back home ready to make it big on Broadway. And, herding all the actors together is the company’s manager, Ben Howe.

As an added bonus for my household, Joanna manages to claim both an Equity card and playbill credit as an understudy in *Lion*. I, on the other hand, travel without the benefit of union backing although I must learn to negotiate and deal with IATSE members—time and time and time again.

Following our two early shakedown engagements, we take to the road for real, heading out of state, all the way to Delaware. A certain sense of freedom and accomplishment accompanies us as we cross state lines. That feeling evaporates when we pull up to the next stop, a middle school in Dover. We have been demoted. And we have plenty of time to think about this while waiting for a volunteer crew to arrive. Our contact has failed to hire anyone to help unload, set up or load-in the scenery, lights, costumes, and all of us pitch in—even actors—to make it happen. It’s a valuable but unanticipated test of our on-the-road survival skills.

Finally, some local high school football players show up. They are courteous but clueless about stage production. We spend all day setting up for one performance, with a quick lunch break in the middle school cafeteria. I am amused by the small tray oﬀered for my lunch and ask for two of everything. The load-out after one performance of *Lion* takes three-and-a-half hours. It is a worst-case benchmark we never match again, thank God.

Our stop the next day is in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania, at a college motivated by and adhering to a devout German Christian faith. The school’s Eisenhower Auditorium is too small for our set so we make a token setup with limited masking and marginal lighting. The second day becomes eﬀectively a day oﬀ. It is my first relatively stress-free day since leaving New Haven, so I do laundry. Ahhh.

We drive the next day to York, Pennsylvania, a mere forty miles away. The name of the place is bigger than its stage. The Strand Capitol Performing Arts Center is tiny. Our two contacts there try to herd a volunteer crew of high school students into compliance with my direction. But they get into each other’s way and the students have no idea who to listen to. Least of all, me. The performance space is minuscule. There are no wings—the storage and access space on either side of the stage. And there is no space behind the upstage curtain to conceal scenery pieces for Act II of this one-performance-stop for *Private Lives*, our heaviest set piece show. My notes from the experience describe it as a “horror show.” I admit I am prone to hyperbole in speech but this still strikes me as an accurate assessment, an appropriate way to kick oﬀ the Halloween month of October. But, what a diﬀerence 300 miles can make.

The theatre at Penn State University is a technical marvel. It is enormous with abundant storage oﬀstage. There is ample fly space and plenty of seats. We stage one performance of each show. The crew, though mostly college students, is very capable. This is probably because there is a vibrant theatre department on campus where dedicated undergrads, according to their academic catalog, are prepared to become “… literate, well-trained Theatre artists, artisans, and craft persons for professional careers across the entertainment industry.”

One can also pursue a Master of Fine Arts degree in theatre, like the one I snatched from the University of Georgia. I know that Penn State’s theatre department takes itself seriously because of the way their curriculum information capitalizes the letter “T” in Theatre in their mission statement and insists on reversing the “e” and “r” in the spelling of the craft, thereby saluting our noble Shakespearean heritage. The department also boasts their aﬃliations with IATSE, Local 829, and the United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT).

We have successful, if not sell-out, performances of both shows at Penn State. The experience here makes me feel I am ready to take on the rest of America. Watch out.