Busting Our Chops

Heart of America, 1980

With our apprenticeship apparently behind us now, the LWT on Tour team sets out for middle America in the early fall of 1980. In Urbana, Illinois, Director Kenneth Frankel and John Jensen, the designer, visit for the final time. They watch performances of both shows and provide their notes to Ben, the company manager, which are mostly positive. We are sent on our way with encouragement and enthusiasm. We pass our final audition.

Through a variety of venues in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Arkansas, we hone our touring chops. We travel a lot and sleep little. Destinations become a blur. Landmarks are few since we often travel at night. Loading, staging, and unloading become routine. Every location is diﬀerent but the challenges become familiar. There are huge houses and small ones, university theatres, community playhouses, and municipal showplaces with big marquees. Performance venues range from traditional hemp-rope-outfitted stages to state-of-the-art electronic and mechanical marvels.

There are also confrontations, breakdowns, and break-ins; fist fights onstage and minor injuries to almost everyone on the tech crew. Cheap hotels and tasteless meals are common. Through long days—and many nights—our travels offer miles and miles of open spaces. There are late nights, early departures, and gags along the way.

At one rustic motel, called the Hammer Inn, some tour jokester finds a box of letters nearby and rearranges the roadside entrance sign greeting from “Take a Break from Your Drive” to “A Rotten Dive.” I never find out who did it but am pretty sure it was an actor, not a techie. The description is accurate and on full display when we depart the next morning just before dawn.

At one particularly frustrating stop, I watch our eighteen-wheeler driver, Joe, in his slightly too-small cowboy hat, punch out his Peterbilt cab bare fisted. The next morning, I notice a cracked window on the passenger side. I’m glad it was the truck and not me. Through it all, the cast and crew grow closer and we learn to appreciate what our drivers go through to get us from stop to stop safely—and mostly on time.

On one exceptional evening performance in St. Louis, everything seems to go wrong. Doors won’t open. Wardrobe pieces go missing. Essential props are misplaced. A set piece falls oﬀ a wall. Actors drop lines. Sound cues are missed. Lights go out for no reason. Following this abysmal show, I make the rounds, speaking to everyone from the company manager to the assistant electrician. I take full responsibility for every miscue. Some agree it is my fault for lack of diligence, but the cast, once again, takes it all in stride.

When I speak about it with Juilliard grad, Henry Stram, who is seated before a mirror taking off his makeup after a performance of *Lion*, he simply shrugs. “When you’ve been on stage with Robin Williams (they were schoolmates at Juilliard) you are prepared for anything. And anyway, tomorrow night we get another chance.”

The experience elevates my attention to detail but also helps me put our eﬀorts in perspective. I am told more than once, “It’s not your fault.”And I am reminded of the essential collaborative nature of stage performance. One of the great things about live theatre is that tomorrow is another day, or night. And with it comes a new performance, a new audience, a new chance to get it right.

It takes six weeks, and dozens of performances, to get us to the farthest western point of this leg of our tour, the Arkansas Repertory Theatre in Little Rock, Arkansas. Here, a fist fight breaks out on stage. Not among any of us but between two of the locals. While this is a momentary distraction, I am more concerned about rain falling through a hole in the roof above the scene shop where my tools and scenery are stored. I advise Miss Doe where our first aid kit is stored in order to tend to any volunteer wounds. She admonishes me, claiming, “This is nothing,” from her perch seated on a road box, smiling broadly, and talking to my wife, a native-born Arkansan. The event grants me new insight into the local color from which my new bride Joanna has sprung.

In November, we reverse our trajectory and head back east. At one stop in Paducah, Kentucky, while pushing a particularly heavy road box, I am reminded of my own simple, downhome roots in Georgia. Looking at the rough terrain, I notice that two of my high school helpers who are struggling with the box between us are barefoot. I stop, thank them for their help, and send them home for shoes. They don’t return. And I am not sure if they are embarrassed, shoeless, or feeling that they’ve just done enough.

During Thanksgiving week, we are granted an amazing reprieve from approaching winter weather. Following two performances at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro, we fly to Florida. Yes, we fly. The semi, crew minivan, and actor’s bus must drive there, but we techies go by air. When we arrive on a rare travel day with no performance, I feel I have found Nirvana.

We have endured long days with little relief through Missouri, Arkansas, Kentucky, and North Carolina. If I were entitled to an agent, they would never have allowed this. I also know I never would have had this amazing, eye-popping experience. I make a mental note to later thank everyone in my training and career who have put me here. Perhaps that is what these pages are all about.

We are in the Sunshine State for five glorious days and nights. We bask in the warmth of two amiable IATSE-led stage crews and feel we are being rewarded for our progress thus far. The Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall in Sarasota is located directly on Sarasota Bay. The auditorium oﬀers a large, spacious house with 1,741 seats and a stage well maintained by a union crew.

Riverside Theatre in Vero Beach is festooned with palm trees stirred by a breeze from the Atlantic. With capable local crews, quick assembly of simple sets, and ample down time we feel we are on vacation. There’s even time for a lavish Thanksgiving celebration. On Turkey Day, we dine on oysters, fresh fish, and champagne and again give thanks to our sponsors back in Connecticut.

It’s good we’ve had this sunny rest stop. For the next eleven days, we play colleges and universities in Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia with only one day oﬀ. Many stops are one-nighters with challenging load-in and load-out logistics. Crews are generally inexperienced volunteers. In rapid succession, we play on stages at Georgia Southern College, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Appalachian State University, North Carolina State University, Duke University, Sweet Briar College, and Virginia State University. It’s a fitting tour of academia because the entire fall has been an enormous learning experience for us all.

During this leg of our jaunt, LWT’s managing director, Edgar Rosenblum, pays a surprise visit. He commends our success and announces that the tech team will no longer be traveling in a minivan. We will soon have a true touring vehicle: a Winnebago camper with actual sleeping quarters. Christmas comes early for us but not without a little darkness.

While in Durham, the entire tour company is wrenched back to reality. On December 8, we learn that John Lennon has been shot and killed in New York City just outside the Dakota where he lived. It is an inexplicable tragedy that deeply troubles all. A pall hangs over Page Auditorium at Duke, which dampens the spirits of cast, crew, and audience during the one performance of *Private Lives*, a comedy that can’t strike the right note tonight. Privately and pointedly we each remind ourselves that the show must go on.

Grit and determination get us through the final three stops of this leg. Once again, the tech team goes by air, flying from Richmond, Virginia, to Groton, Connecticut. But there is no sense of the exhilaration we felt on the flight to Florida. It’s cold and gray in New England. And we are all looking forward to a long holiday break.

We end our year with three one-night stands. The Garde Arts Center in New London, Connecticut, is a former vaudeville house and movie theatre. We load in the set for *Private Lives* from a busy street to a tiny stage aided by a roughneck pickup crew. The load-in of *Lion* onto the stage of the junior high school in Middleton, New York, requires wrestling boxes and set pieces up a staircase.

But our final gig may be the worst so far. The crew for load-in at Atlantic City High School in New Jersey is peppered with a hodgepodge of hands who seem to know nothing about stage scenery. Access to the performance space is brutal. The crew mishandles set pieces causing severe damage. Fortunately, there will be time to touch up both sets, which sorely need it by now, during the coming weeks.

Cast, crew, and drivers return to New Haven drained and exhausted. The holiday break begins on December 15 and is scheduled to last until January 11. Happy holidays. This weary monkey intends to sleep through them all.