On the Road—Again

Rocky Mountain High

As 1981 gets underway, we return from our holiday break. Joanna and I have visited one family and then the other. We recount our road tales *ad nauseam*. The stories sound fanciful, embellished, made-up. But they are not. When we dive too deep, eyes of polite listeners glaze over. Not being theatre people, they don’t recognize the names, places, or details regarding the wide diﬀerences between venues. Our family and friends prefer to discuss Bulldogs and Razorbacks on their way out the door to hunt deer.

Time spent together on the road and recounting our travels draws us closer. We return to New Haven from El Dorado, Arkansas, shortly after New Year’s Day. It is dead of winter. During the holiday break, an additional week of performances has been added so we return earlier than expected. This surely makes financial sense for Long Wharf Theatre and also puts an added jingle in our pockets following an indulgent Yuletide.

I look forward to reuniting with my road family which has remained mostly intact. But there is a new master electrician. Dan Clayman got slammed with some gut-wrenching gastric distress and has decided not to continue the tour. However, he is there to meet us and introduce us to his replacement, David Stach, a cheery but shy recent student at University of Wisconsin.

For a week, Dan pours over every detail of lighting design for the two shows with the new master electrician. Dave feigns confidence and slowly takes responsibility for packing, loading, hanging, and running lights for the tour. He accepts the responsibility, knowing Friar Tuck will back him up and soon he assumes a swagger. I guess it comes from viewing life from an elevated catwalk or a comfortable control panel, knowing you can make an actor glow at a critical moment or leave them gasping for attention in shadow.

As the touring technical director, I also assume an administrative posture in LWT’s windswept parking lot. As distinguished as Long Wharf is, its setting is decidedly not. On the day of our return, the tech crew assembles slowly. We greet each other, stamp our feet, complain about the cold. The eighteen-wheeler with all our gear has departed the day before. We wait for our humble Winnebago. Soon, the actor’s comfortable passenger bus pulls up to the theatre’s entrance. The bus door whooshes open and Art, the driver, greets us warmly. I feel heat from the bus rush out as we exchange New Year’s wishes with steamy breath.

As if cued, a vibrant crowd emerges from LWT’s lobby and races toward us. Joanna is with the company today because Ben Howe has contracted some illness. She fills in as company director for the time being and gets the more comfortable passage in the company bus to our first destination on this leg. And, frankly, I am glad she receives this small benefit. They are well-bundled, tightly knit, and sleepy. Each salutes the tech crew as they pass and quickly board the bus. We answer politely and shudder as the door closes. The bus departs.

Soon, our cozy motorhome arrives driven by broadly grinning Ramone. We scamper aboard. I am the last to enter. There is a collective sigh of relief as we hear the door close. I notice that the hairs in my nostrils have frozen into icy splinters. I am sure I have never been so cold as we head west toward Corning, New York, for one performance of *Private Lives*.

The single load-in and load-out performance in Corning is a practice run for what lies ahead. A well-worn stage, part of the renowned Corning Glass Works, is compact with limited storage. We are grateful there are no stairs. The seasoned union stage crew guides our load-in through the house. And the show goes oﬀ without a hitch. It is a boost we all benefit from during our next stop which could not be more diﬀerent.

The Eggis a performance space in Albany, New York. It gets its name from a distinctive shape, an oval sphere elevated on a tall pedestal. It’s awe-inspiring for first-time visitors and intimidating for a young stage monkey. At the time of the LWT tour, this modern space is so new there are few veteran stage hands or even actors to ask about it. Once over the shock of seeing this odd theatre, my next thought is, *How do I get my set up there?*

We are booked for multiple performances of both shows. That means every flat, staircase, light crate, wardrobe box, prop, makeup case, crew member, and actor must ascend the several-story-high structure. This is not a problem, thanks to the huge elevator that opens upstage center in our performance space: the 982-seat Kitty Carlisle Hart Theatre. We are assisted by a young, capable, newly recruited IATSE crew who know how to handle our road boxes, stage our setting, feed our cables, and quickly convert every instruction into action.

We are there for six nights of performances and two matinees. In my position, I am free to explore Albany during and between performances. Being the assistant stage manager, Joanna is not. She sleeps late and mostly hangs out with her primary protégé, Miss Doe. Duties on this tour are not strictly separated. Family-like, we help each other as needed.

With Albany being the state capitol, I find a restaurant downtown that caters to New York legislators and local lobbyists. Here, I dine on local fare. My selections are guided by a grumpy waitstaﬀ, which often overrides my initial order, assuring me I will like something else better. One day, I order oysters on the half shell and blindly hand back my menu. The waiter does not move. I look around.

“Trust me,” he says. “You don’t want the oysters. Clams are better. Local. Fresh.”

The clams are succulent, salty, cringing with life. It is not easy for me to resist my initial impulses and follow my waiter’s suggestion but I soon agree they are spot on. Since that day, I have always deferred to in-house suggestions. After all, they know better than I what’s going on in the kitchen. As a backstage ape, I fully understand.

I return to the restaurant a few times, often bringing others. It takes a while, but finally I notice each table server wears an oﬃcial-looking badge. This is the first, perhaps only, union-affiliated restaurant where I ever dine. And while I hold mixed opinions about various union stagehand engagements, I’ll follow the guidance of a union table server every time no matter how grumpy the delivery.

Our next stop oﬀers another one-of-a-kind performance venue. The Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts in Detroit, Michigan, was considered top of its class when built in 1928. It was funded by truckloads of auto-industry cash. A local landmark, the distinguished 1,731-seat performance space has been recently restored and only a few years before, in 1977, it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

An Art Deco *façade* sets the architectural stage for lavish interior appointments. Decor and furnishings capture a spirit of unparalleled American opulence found in the days before the Stock Market Crash of 1929. Quickly, the theatre fell on dark times. But through it all, the Music Hallhosted notable names. Fred Astaire has danced here and so has Mikhail Baryshnikov. Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie, Nina Simone, Etta James, and Billie Holiday have all raised their voices to the stately rafters during times when tickets were cheap.

Ray Charles calls this one of his all-time favorite places to play. And to the list of famous performers to stand on this stage you can add every familiar voice associated with the Motown sound with Berry Gordy, Jr. driving the train—Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, Smokey Robinson, the Temptations, and the Four Tops. Many other distinguished celebrities, including Florenz Ziegfeld, Carl Sandburg, and Glenn Frey, have held court here. There’s some serious, sacred soul and sweat embedded in these iconic stage planks.

In 1973, the theatre was sensitively restored inside and out. The audience space maintains a throwback elegance discretely accommodating modern electrical and safety requirements. The stage equipment has also been updated with modern electrics and a sprinkler system. But for the most part, a stage is a stage is a stage. Here, there are many traditional features. A double purchase pin rail system facilitates loading in and out through an alley via a ramp stage left. Fabric borders are hung on hemp lines. The stage space is large enough for storage of set pieces for both of our plays. This respect for, and utility of, traditional staging techniques goes hand in hand with a tradition of human engagement dating back to the dawn of human time.

The monkey inside me is struck by the enduring practicality of traditional proscenium stage mechanics no matter which architectural style the front of house reflects. I also enjoy watching the local stage crew handle our unfamiliar boxes and set pieces, as well as their action on stage on their own home field. This crew is “solid, capable” according to my notes. And later, following the run of the two shows and final load-out, I find that they are “even nice.”I believe that this scrawny cable hanger somehow gains their respect. They certainly deserve mine.

Following the eye-popping spectacle of Detroit, the LWT road caravan makes two unremarkable stops in Indiana, one in Terra Hauteand another in West Lafayette. Upon arrival at these two Midwestern hubs, my team may have swaggered a bit too much. Without besmirching names or recounting annoying incidents, my trusty datebook, now curled and stained with time, sneers with terms like “colorless” “know it all” “jerky” and “zombies.”Maybe this is why I barely remember these brief residences.

Let’s just say LWT got in, got it on, got it done, and got out of town. I’m sure we made the most of our next day oﬀ on the road and the following travel day. We are spoiled once again with an airplane flight through Chicago’s O’Hare airport to another airport very far south.

After brutal winter weather, shaky loads in and out on unfamiliar docks and unpredictable local crews, landing in Texas feels like coming home again. Even though this batten puller has never been to Houston, I am pleased to be back in the Southland. And after being packed in a motorhome with the tech crew, I look forward to breathing some fresh air, even if it is warm and humid.

The Jesse H. Jones Hall for the Performing Arts near the campus of the University of Houstonhas a commanding presence. It occupies an entire city block. The white marble exterior is accented with columns eight stories tall. This *façade* has all the subtlety of a rodeo rider with a ten-gallon hat on a New York subway.

There is an enormous lobby and the house can seat nearly 3,000 people. The most amazing feature is an acoustically sensitive ceiling suspended over the audience and composed of dozens of panels that can be raised or lowered to deaden or sweeten sound. In the two weeks we are at Jones Hall, we never touch these intimidating floating sonic reflectors. We have way too much else to do.

For once, there is a reasonable schedule. Four consecutive evening performances of *The Lion in Winter,* followed by five consecutive nights of *Private Lives*, then a brief two-night reprise of *Lion*. This means only two changeovers. It’s like a vacation for me and I take full advantage. I spend nearly two weeks devouring barbecue in every conceivable form, washed down with dark and light Mexican beers. By the time the run is over we are all ready for a new setting.

One advantage of an extended residence like the one in Houston is the opportunity to rethink, regroup, and repack. I spend two full days examining the truck-packing decisions I made in New Haven, including the sequences of loading and unloading, and exploring timesaving improvements. I create new hand-drawn diagrams demonstrating how to handle and install certain tricky pieces of scenery. This pause in our journey gives me time to breathe, create new restraint mechanisms, and modify sequences of assembly. It is a welcome belt-tightening opportunity before we head to the West Coast.

Until now, I always felt the comfort of proximity to our launching pad in New Haven where my boss could quickly forward me anything I need even if it is just a hearty “good luck.”It has been a decade since Neil Armstrong’s “One small step …” pronouncement. But that moment seen on TV continues to fire my brain. In the next several weeks, the Long Wharf Theatre on Tourmaiden launch is going to the moon.

It’s a good thing we have the extended residence in Houston. The next week is a beast. There are three one-night performances and a two-nighter in Monroe and Ruston, Louisiana, and in Wichita Falls and Lubbock, Texas, respectively. A travel day is thrown into the mix but there is nothing restful about the thousand miles we cover in Louisiana and Texas or the numerous loads we perform in unfamiliar, and sometimes unaccommodating, situations.

Fortunately, the IATSE stage crews we meet are lively, friendly, and welcoming, if not particularly experienced at rapid set changes. I begin to notice how routine my stage directions have become at each new load-in. I direct the placement of flats, road boxes, and set pieces in specific relation to the proscenium arch and according to which play is to be performed that night. And with the help of all the senior crew members of each department who will be aﬀected—props, wardrobe, electricians, and the stage managers—I have mapped very specific locations for all items not only on the truck but also within performance venues.

It becomes clear that the first five-to-ten minutes with a new crew is critical in establishing the necessary rapport to get things done. IATSE crews are uniformly professional, but varying degrees of cooperativeness are established immediately upon meeting the union crew chief. Non-union crews, typically college kids, are enthusiastic but have short attention spans. And I discover the older the stage hand, the less they respond to being told what to do.

Self-deprecation and lame humor go a long way in establishing rapport. I would usually manage to get a chuckle with certain tried and true lines:

“If you’re having trouble rolling that crate up the ramp, grab a diﬀerent one. It’s probably even heavier.”

“If you can’t lift that box, talk to the makeup supervisor. She brought it in.”

“Only one road box? Next time grab two. One under each arm. They balance.”

As I deliver these tongue-in-cheek encouragements, I am also lifting, rolling, and stacking stage gear just like everyone else. Being hands-on during the onload and offload demonstrates my understanding of what the crew is going through. My secret advantage is that I know each box intimately, what’s in it, how the casters work, and all the little quirks. As I call out directions, I know how to move each item and shove it into a useful storage spot on stage. It’s important to gain a stage crew’s trust, if not esteem, during the early moments of a load-in. Both are best.

After Lubbock, we have three days to make our next gig in Palm Springs, California, a place I assume only celebrities visit. I have heard of it during late nights watching Johnny Carson on *The Tonight Show* but no one I know, not even my globetrotting grandparents, has ever been here. We are giddy with the thought of sleeping late—even in our puttering motorhome—eating leisurely meals, and enjoying the scenery of West Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and Southern California.

In addition to our comfortable salaries, each of us is also paid a *per diem* fee to cover the daily costs of hotels and restaurants. This is the life we have all been dreaming about. Up to this point, our schedules have been so demanding, and with no “back home” expenses, we are hard pressed to spend even our *per diem* allotments, much less our salaries. Joanna and I have another unique advantage. We, unlike the others, so far as I can tell, are the only tour members routinely sharing one room and reducing our hotel costs by half, even though we each get separate *per diem* payments. Cha-ching. We are flush. We feel well-endowed and during this three-day span we are intent on spoiling ourselves. Traveling west also gives us two bonus hours to lavish on luxuries.

We cross into New Mexico, spend the night in Santa Fe, then push on the next day to Grand Canyon National Park. We check into a reasonably priced hotel and see lots of earnest hikers loaded with camping gear. There are also fleets of tour buses filled with gray- and blue-hairs peering at the Canyon through wide windows and offloading to buy souvenirs. But we are on a short visit and looking for real adventure.

Joanna, Miss Doe, and I shop for a small helicopter tour to whisk us through the Canyon. There are a number of options to choose from. The one we select is an old-school fishbowl-like craft. The pilot is a Vietnam vet. What could be better? We pile into the tiny copter after signing a raft of releases, basically assuring us that anything can happen and if something goes south it will be no one’s fault but our own. The girls climb into the back seat. I sit beside the pilot, practically shoulder-to-shoulder and surrounded by glass. We tighten our belts, literally, and figuratively.

The pilot is cool, confident, cocky, and not the least interested in why we are here, where we come from, or how we—at our tender ages—have the money to do this. The chopper guy cranks the propeller, flips a few switches, and mutters into a microphone. Slowly, the prop overhead comes to life. A solid, spherical window of glass surrounds me, stirring memories of goldfish I overfed as a boy. With an abrupt angular lurch, we arc forward, then up. There seems nothing is holding me back.

Now, the pilot begins to converse. He asks polite questions. The girls are silent and wide-eyed in the back seat. It is hard to hear but I try to respond for us all. We cruise low. The Canyon is nowhere in sight. I speak loudly to convince the pilot and myself of my confidence in this, my first small helicopter ride. I am surprisingly calm and quietly congratulating myself for this bold event, then … the bottom drops out.

I have never before or since experienced anything like it. Our pilot in this moment hugs the ground with the chopper as he engages us in empty conversation, a classic example of a stage magician’s audience misdirection.

Right in the middle of some banal back-and-forth chatter like, “We’re from Connecticut. The only helicopter I have ever ridden in was …” the treetops disappear. At the same time, the pilot pushes the copter forward and down about thirty feet. We are falling through space. There is nothing beneath us but the Canyon, perhaps a mile below. My body convulses. I know I am doomed. I will go first by a microsecond because I am in front. I howl like a chimpanzee.

Then the pilot levels oﬀ and smiles. “Everybody okay?” The girls cling to each other as their squeals slowly fade. We three passengers sit rigid in stunned silence. It takes a moment to convince ourselves that all is as it should be.

“Now, let’s go look at the Canyon,” the pilot says sprightly.

To this day, the only part of that adventure I remember is the death-defying dip on the rim of the Canyon. In retrospect, this may be the most eﬀective moment of theatre I experience on the entire tour. Our pilot has a brilliant gift for staging, timing, and execution. Rather than touring it on the road, he takes his show into the air, every day.

After this gripping performance and a wobbly return to our world, every eﬀect we execute, every moment on stage seems tame, even drab, by comparison. It was a literal mile-high thrill, well-staged, perfectly timed, and a moment that lives vividly to this day in my mind.