The Final Sweep

It’s springtime in 1981 and our road trip enters its final sweep where it began: in New England. This ragtag caravan has hushed rowdy crowds, opened minds, and lifted spirits. It has filled large and small performance halls with sighs and laughter. It has stopped in thirty-one states and logged more than 10,000 miles. Now, it’s nearly over. It’s likely that those who have benefitted the most are not the audiences but those who worked the hardest: the performers, the drivers, the managers, and the stage hands.

The final leg of the tour begins on a Sunday with a day off, right where the adventure started in New Haven, Connecticut. That feels particularly odd because now, none of us are residents in the town where we lived fulltime only the year before. We stay in a simple local motel like any other road venue. But now we share a diﬀerent vibe. There is a feeling of triumph among us, having traversed the continental United States on two diﬀerent vectors: Maine to California and Michigan to Florida. We feel accomplished, capable, secure.

The first stop on this final leg is at the University of Connecticut in Storrs, where our production stage manager, Chris Greene, recently graduated. He is one of the very few members of our team not actually schooled in some type of theatre. But he does have an extensive practical stage background. The university granted him a degree in philosophy. Maybe this is why Chris maintains a serene, even cerebral composure during the most histrionic moments backstage, onstage or on the road.

Here we have one performance of each of our two shows, and I begin my final countdown. We will stage nine more *Private Lives* performances and ten more of *Lion*. Nostalgia creeps into my brain. The Storrs residence is similar to many others: awkward loading and storage details; mixed professional, college and volunteer crews; and idiosyncratic masking, lighting, and pin rail locations. The shows, with only one changeover, go without incident. We leave again around midnight for Hanover, New Hampshire, home of Dartmouth College.

I enjoy my week here immensely, especially since Friar Tuck is a recent graduate. He basks in this return to his alma mater and takes special time introducing me to his home theatre: the traditional hemp rope line sets, mechanical winches, scene shop, and subtle character of the Hopkins Center for the Arts. There is a warning on the stage door admonishing students: “No Bare Feet.” We spend a relaxed week here presenting four stagings of each show.

The countdown continues. Notes in my daybook make it look like a sports score: PL 5, LW 4.For me, this is something like a victory lap. Our next stop is less than a hundred miles away at the University of Vermont in Burlington. We have a full day to make the short drive. Life on the road could not be more delicious. Then, back-to-back one-nighters in Vermont and Maine remind us that life on the road can be a challenge. Conditions are varied, as are crews, but there is no stopping us now.

Our final stop: Springfield, Massachusetts. Symphony Hall is a fitting end-of-the-line venue for the tour. The beautifully restored house first opened in 1911, with classic stage features including a fifteen-line, winch-enhanced fly system. Built in the Greek Revival tradition, it has an orchestra pit and excellent acoustics. The stage is shallow, but we have learned how to adjust and adapt to almost any performance space. Our union setup and performance crew is eager, energized and fairly youthful.

We stage one performance of *Lion* and a final performance of *Private Lives*. We all share a sense of satisfaction and wistfulness as we conduct the last load-out and return to our home base in New Haven. The experience has been rich and rare but it takes this ape several years to understand just how unique it really is.

My final thought about the experience is that touring is a young man’s sport. Following this hard, heady year and traveling thousands of miles and visiting dozens of diﬀerent theatres, I need a break. The LWT Touring Company returns home, weary and triumphant. I know I’ve had enough touring.

During the summer, I once again attend the annual Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC). Through this event, I am led to meet college professor Bruce “Buzz” Podewell, PhD on his home turf in the French Quarter of New Orleans, Louisiana. Apparently, this cable-hauling humanoid is not done learning yet.