Don’t Stand So Close to Me

Uptown, New Orleans

After two years on the Tulane faculty, I’ve had enough. It seems odd because my reviews are generally quite positive. I get along well enough with others on the faculty. Students have generous things to say. In one set of published comments, Professor Hunter is described as “a vibrant, intelligent teacher.” Other students describe him as “available” and “helpful.” Another gushes, “I would recommend this course to anyone interested in technical theatre.”

But there is no way stage production at this small, liberal arts college with limited production funding can compare with the lure of Broadway and energy of a national tour. Here, the “roar of the greasepaint” is a whisper. And the “smell of the crowd” is stale. I decide to move on while my stage credits still look good on paper. In fact, this latest academic stage credit is another distinguished feather in my slightly crooked Robin Hood cap.

I reach out to other institutions and get a good response. I am invited to visit the University of Washington in Seattle. I’m oﬀered a position there at a major, very busy theatre department. I say no thanks.Shortly after that, I am oﬀered another post. This one, at Virginia Tech, comes with tenure. I politely respond, “Let me think about it,”but inconsiderately neglect to call the chairman back. When his oﬃce finally reaches me several days later, I respond, “Thanks, anyway.”

Call me arrogant, irresponsible, thoughtless. I certainly have so rebuked myself through the years. Aside from the day-to-day tedium, the constant threat of “publish or perish” and the haughty one-upmanship of my colleagues, one incident in particular nudges me toward the exit.

One morning, in early spring of 1983, I am seated, hunched over my drafting table working on a detail of some upcoming stage piece. My oﬃce door is open, which means I am available for conference to all. Except for our receptionist in a far-removed room, I am the only one at work in the oﬃce. Theatre professionals tend to sleep in, arrive, and stay late. I am a morning person. I do not see the young woman enter but notice I have company when her perfectly manicured, scarlet nails appear at the top of my drawing board.

“Good morning, Professor Hunter.”

“Good morning, Miss …”

She gives me her name and comments on my drawing. I recognize her as a quiet, punctual attendee of my basic Technical Theatre Production class as I launch into a rambling explanation of how the view I am drawing of this particular stage piece will contribute to an upcoming production. “Next to building unusual platforms, set pieces, and evocative scenery, I enjoy solving unique stage problems on paper …” She listens politely.

“I was wondering…” she interrupts.

Outside my open window, Spanish moss rustles in the oak trees and students murmur quietly on their way to class. In the distance, a Laughing Gull calls out. The persistent drumming of pointed fingernails on my drafting table drowns out these familiar sounds.

“I was wondering,” she continues, “what will it take to make an A in your class?” She looks me straight in the eye and accelerates the pace of her nails. For a moment, I am confused and speechless. Then embarrassed. Then appalled. I stammer and probably blush. I quickly explain that grading is clearly explained in the class syllabus and perhaps I need to make it plainer in the next class.

I rise abruptly from my stool and announce that I must attend a meeting that I have completely forgotten. I usher her out and close my door, walking quickly to the front of the building. I look back and see her standing in the quiet hall, watching me with a confused smile. I am certain today that I completely misinterpreted the young lady’s intent. But at the time, I was equally certain that I had been propositioned by a confident, calculating young woman five years younger than myself. Thanks for the warning, Mr. Nabokov.

During the same spring, I also apply to positions for summer stock theatre companies. But this time I am highly selective, whereas in the past, I used a shotgun approach or accepted any position that came my way without competition. And at this point in my stage career, I have achieved almost everything I hoped for: major credits, big names, advancing authority, and colorful locations.

I am not, at the time, one to settle down and stay home. In fact, the two-year residence on the Tulane campus is my longest to date. My family, all impassioned devotees of the Deep South with all the positives and negatives that entails, often refer to me as the family’s Closet Yankee. After all, I left my home to attend college in another state and it is well known I prefer a trip to New York City over a visit to Atlanta. Heck, I don’t even sound like a Georgia boy anymore.

So, it comes as no surprise—least of all to me—that I would prefer to see Provincetown Playhouse in Manhattan or Williamstown Theatre Festival in my credits over any summer stock company in the sweltering South. So, late in the game, I apply to both. Since 1955, massive stars have exercised their thespian chops in a summertime environment in the mountains of Massachusetts and I intend to join their ranks.

Names such as Cole Porter, Tennessee Williams, Joanne Woodward, and Austin Pendleton have appeared on playbills for Provincetown. In the season just before this one, two familiar names Stan Wojewodski Jr., and Kenneth Frankel (both of whom I’ve worked with) appear on the playbills as directors. There is also a familiar actor, Edward Hermann, who appeared in the Long Wharf production of *Beach House* that went to the 1980 Montreal Olympic Games under my technical direction, who did a summer turn there the season before. Maybe these notables will remember me and put in good word.

But no, I do not get an oﬀer from Provincetown Playhouse. However, I do receive an oﬀer from Williamstown Theatre Festival on the campus of Williams College in Massachusetts to become their technical director for the summer season. Heady stuﬀ. And I am pleased for the moment.

After the oﬀer but before my expected early-summer arrival, something clicks in my head. I have had it with working doctor’s hours for menial pay. Production work is grueling but satisfying. I gain respect from managers, crew members, and occasional cast members. I have distinguished credits and highly respected referrals. But somehow it is not enough. And maybe my rise through the ranks has been too fast, too easy.

Late in May, I attend a college reunion at my undergraduate alma mater. Many of my peers are well on their way to high-paying careers in family businesses. There are several doctors and lots of lawyers. There is even one international shipping magnate. During foul-mouthed discussions at old fraternity houses, I feel suddenly unfulfilled. I return to New Orleans following the reunion with a conviction to change my path.

I call the company manager at Williamstown Theatre Festival and tell him I have changed my mind. In a brusque, New England accent, this emerging power player in the professional theatre world suddenly begins to sound like a roughneck dock hand. He insults me for trying to negotiate at this late date. He believes I am trying to up my salary and finally oﬀers a pittance more. I tell him that the pay is not the issue. He tries to persuade me to stay onboard by tossing big names my way of players and directors already committed to the Williamstown summer season. I tell him that none of this matters. I am determined, even, finally, defiant. He assures me that this is a terribly unprofessional way to decline the oﬀer. I agree.

“You know I have friends,” he says, and ends the conversation with an oath and a slam. He is right. I never work in theatre again. But it is not because of this angry summer stock company manager but by my own choice. The decision is all mine. It’s time to change course.

Maybe, somehow, I know there’s a baby on the way. My first little pearl is peering down from heaven and maybe she’s watching as I douse the footlights one last time in order to start a new life for her and a little baby sister to come. But this former stage monkey still loves the sound of the orchestra in the pit, the smell of the freshly printed playbill, the plush feel of the seats, the taste of anticipation in my mouth, and the glow of the curtain rising for the First Act.