Superstar

Atlanta Georgia, 1977

It’s Christmastime in my hometown, but I feel like a stranger standing alone beneath the work lights on the pin rail of Atlanta’s Alliance Theatre. The narrow loft basically extends from the front to the rear of the stage, providing access to the cables and counterweights that control the flying in and out of hanging scenery. I inspect the flies and familiarize myself with how the cables are secured by pins on the rail.

A wiry guy scrambles up the ladder, introduces himself as a member of the house staﬀ, and asks if I’m okay. I am nervous as a cat. Strange house. New show. Unfamiliar crew. He says he’ll stay with me during the run-through. He assures me it’s a “piece of cake.”

Suddenly, there is rattling in my headphones. The stage manager informs us there is just enough time to do a quick run-through. We do a rapid cue-to-cue without dancers. There’s no time to be nervous. My fly loft companion eases my anxiety. Together, we go through the motions cued by the boss: open the elegant front curtain, raise and lower the drapes for diﬀerent scenes, and make a small Christmas tree grow into a gigantic one.

Next, it’s time to practice the show-stopping snow scene. My co-fly-guy shows me how to gently rock a pair of cables for the big moment. I study his technique as he artfully begins to drop big paper “snowflakes” slowly at first until they become a flurry. I practice. He approves. I’ve got this.

During the December 1977 holiday season, while I am between academic sessions at UGA, I accept my first professional theatre job as master fly operator for the Atlanta Ballet’s annual *The Nutcracker* performances. Control of various scenic elements are placed in my eager, inexperienced hands.

The producers have four performances scheduled for the Alliance in Atlanta that year and each is expected to be a sellout. The ballet is squeezed into the resident theatre’s repertory season, so there is very little time for *Nutcracker* rehearsal. Immediately following this engagement, the play *Tiger Tail*, written by Tennessee Williams, is set to open in Atlanta.

We have meetings, meetings, and more meetings to introduce, confirm, adjust, modify, tweak, and emote. The theatre business is not much different from any other collective engagement, except there is a fixed deadline that will take place a few months later. The show must go on. So, there is always urgency attached to these meetings.

In one series of frantic meetings with the very curt and agitated ballet stage manager, I am briefed on my crucial role. I receive a cue sheet and a pair of headphones, and am told to standby on the fly loft for the one-and-only run-through of the entire ballet. As the master f operator, I’ll be in charge of all hanging scenery, also known as the flies. These are the drapes, settings, and set pieces that hover above the stage waiting for their audience presentation. These items “fly” in and out on cue by way of simple block-and-tackle devices operated from the fly loft, which is an elevated platform obscured from audience view in the stage wings.

If you ever have an occasion to walk outside a live performance theatre in the daylight and observe the architecture, you will see a tall appendage at least one floor higher than the rest of the structure, near the rear of the building. This is the fly loft where much of the traditional scenery rests prior to performance.

The fly operator runs the fly loft, usually without an assistant, depending on the budget and complexity of the show. It’s where the operator—at almost every moment—has an opportunity to: (a) succeed, by following the cue of the boss which no one will recognize; (b) excel, which also no one including the audience will recognize; or (c) fail, which everyone will recognize since it will be discussed in the press review and in the production meeting the next day.

During the one-time run-through that afternoon—and serving as master fly op for the first time in my life—I climb the Alliance’s vertical metal ladder to the loft and put on my headphones. I clip an audio control box to my belt and switch it on. Immediately, I hear bored voices coming from the lighting control booth. I introduce myself but get no response. I watch the stage below as props and minimal pieces of scenery are set out, mesmerized by all the activity. I can see everything but no one can see me. I know this is really the best seat in the house.

When the stage manager brings rehearsal to a close, I am much more confident. But I know it will feel quite diﬀerent once the dancers are in place and music is swelling the hall with a capacity audience. These are the butterflies-in-the-gut experiences that draw me to live theatre.

When I descend the ladder, I thank my wiry mentor and cross the stage with a glance out to the dark house. A few stage hands are sweeping up paper snowflakes. The prop team is arranging items in the wings and getting set for the live show. The footlights are dimmed as work lights.

Then, the house lights come up and I see him. By this time in my fledgling theatric career, I have read enough, seen enough, and studied enough to be sure who this is. I’m also young enough to be bold enough.

I grab an old playbill from a stack at the edge of the stage. Luckily, I just happen to have a pen. I walk down the steps and into the mostly empty house. Playwright Tennessee Williams is sitting three rows back. He appears distracted, maybe bored, waiting for the cast and crew to arrive for their run-through of *Tiger Tail.*

“Mr. Williams?” I begin, with all the respect I can muster. “I would be so honored to have your autograph.” He turns and looks me squarely in the eyes. He doesn’t seem annoyed or flattered by my interruption of his world. Perhaps it is an understanding that this is just a part of his job.

“Certainly, young man,” he says.

I don’t remember if there is any further exchange. His simple signature on the back of a long-forgotten playbill is one of my most treasured possessions—an homage to creative greatness, brilliance, and humanity. The keepsake is a reminder that the stage monkey receives many extra benefits and privileges.