Ivy League Autumn

New Haven, Autumn 1979

Following a little summertime tanning and fishing along the quiet flowing rivers in the deep South, Joanna (whom now I often call Jo) and I set out once again for New England in the fall of 1979. With the help of our party-loving, free-for-the-summer, up-for-just-about-anything colleague, Petey, we arrive in the meat-packing district of New Haven, Connecticut, home of Yale University.

Long Wharf Theatre (LWT), another distinguished pillar of LORT, extends me an oﬀer to become assistant technical director in their teeny but busy scene shop, which I accept. I report directly to congenial, very capable David McWilliams, LWT’s technical director. We learn later that Dave comes from a distinguished family and is the nephew of rising culinary guru, Julia Child. LWT’s stage door becomes our front door to the glowing lights of Broadway, just beyond the horizon and fewer than a hundred miles away.

A revival of Lillian Hellman’s *Watch on the Rhine* immediately absorbs the LWT scene shop. As I examine and mentally break down the workload of the shop drawings, I am clueless about the significance of this production. It will be kicking oﬀ the new season on the main stage and there is whispering of an extended run at a venue yet to be revealed.

LWT’s artistic director, Arvin Brown, is directing. John Jensen is scenic designer. These prominent stage names mean nothing to me but I can tell from deference of others that the designer is a big shot. With brush and paint bucket in hand, he looks like any other older stage monkey to me. Later, I learn he has shifted artistic gears mid-career to concentrate on costume design for films, ultimately earning two Oscar nominations.

Actors in *Watch* include Harris Yulin and George Hearn, who will receive a Tony nomination for the role. Arvin Brown’s wife, Joyce Ebert, is also in the cast. But the big news to me is that the leading role is being played by Jan Miner. Ms. Miner has visited every American living room with a TV during the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s as Madge, the gossipy manicurist in Palmolive dish soap commercials. Now that’s a star!

On opening night and through the entire run, the show draws big crowds and big names. Although I see neither, I learn that spicy novelist Erica Jong is attending one night and, on another night, Liv Ullman is in the house. As assistant technical director with strenuous daytime demands, I’m no longer responsible for running technical aspects of the production. So, I am far away and probably sound asleep when these and other celebrities admire and critique the work of their peers—and possibly weigh in on my own stagecraft.

As with Center Stage, the scene shop at Long Wharf is compact, well-equipped, and modestly staﬀed. In this position, I lead a crew of three other carpenters. Crabmeat comes from the Ashland Shakespeare Festival in Oregon. Scottis a quiet local guy who grew up in nearby Connecticut. And Joe Z. is a veteran stage carpenter and a member of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) labor union. Joe’s been here a long time. The rest of us are newbies. Right away, I discover that Joe and I are on a collision course.

At first, we all seem to get along in the tiny shop. But Joe begins dismissing my directions, ultimately ignoring me all together. Things grow increasingly awkward. Joe accepts the others like long-lost buddies. He hovers over a work table to casually converse with Crabmeat. He laughs loudly over a joke with Scott then walks right by me without making eye contact. Do I swagger too much through the shop? Have I inadvertently questioned his ability? Or could this simply be a union-endorsed rite of passage?

Then, one day, the silent treatment is over. For some mysterious reason, Joe and I become allies. Like surviving the hazing at a college fraternity, somehow, I have gained his camaraderie, if not his respect. I don’t know what caused our collegial breach, nor what ended it. It’s a valuable lesson in dealing with union members and provides insight I will use in coming seasons. I come away from the experience understanding that in tight quarters like these, working with new colleagues, the best strategy is to be yourself, do your best and respect others. It is a work code that guides me over many hurdles in future work environments. It also teaches me to be my own best friend.

Brilliant autumn colors surround the apartment that Joanna and I share in a quiet collegiate neighborhood. And despite a frantically busy fall building, mounting, staging, and striking scenery for shows on two diﬀerent stages, Jo and I manage to take in lots of local sights.

As she did in Baltimore, Joanna immediately secures a position with the production staﬀ that, organizationally, is superior to mine. She is anointed assistant stage manager for the theatre’s second stage. The lessons she learns here will serve her well in the near future. In their 1979–1980 run, Long Wharf embarks on a very ambitious season. As raw, fresh recruits, we are thrown directly into the mix. Two concurrent shows will overlap and demand the attention of all parties.

*Jitters* is a new play by Canadian playwright, David French. This will be Joanna’s domain for the next few months. She is charged with stage managing duties including cueing actors, attending to set dressing, and occasional schmoozing in the Green Room. The set, designed by Eldon Elder, is mostly done when we arrive, though I do get to participate in final touches. Surprisingly, Eldon remembers me from an encounter at University of Georgia in Athens when he was there on a book tour. Or at least he says so. During his residence in New Haven, Eldon jokingly yells up to me that he’ll vouch for my “card” in Local 829, the United Scenic Artists union, as I straddle an A-frame ladder touching up one of his set pieces between performances. His oﬀer falls on my distracted ears. In retrospect, I should have followed up on this significant oﬀer—though I doubt seriously I could have passed their rigorous exams.

Soon, the celebrity meter accelerates at Long Wharf. There’s talk of a brand new musical ready to test its lungs and legs in this incubation chamber for Broadway. It suits me and Joanna just fine. After all, I can sing every note of *Guys and Dolls*, remember?In high school, Joanna cut her theatrical teeth in musical theatre. And we both shared minor billing in our first joint production—an early twentieth-century operetta by Franz Lehar called *The Merry Widow—*back in Athens, Georgia, at about the time we first met.

Echoes of big names drift down from the elevated catwalks and across the Long Wharf stage. We hear that a musical, now in rehearsal, titled *Partners* is coming next. Comedian, actor, movie director Mike Nichols *(Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, The Graduate, Catch-22, Carnal Knowledge)* will produce and direct. Tommy Tune from Texas, a giant in more ways than one, will choreograph. As opening night grows closer, the name of the new work is changed to *Double Feature.* I’ve read about spontaneous name changes, rewrites, and lead actors coming and going but have never been so near, let alone a piece of it. It’s another bold venture for LWT that creates lots of attention during pre-production. I am quietly thrilled to be a part of it.

British designer Tony Walton, the former spouse of Julie Andrews, designs the set. During a preliminary production meeting while describing the diﬃculty of creating a stage version of a movie theatre on our tiny stage, Tony grabs my shoulder and commends the confidence our team shows, calling us “courageous.” He clearly understands what lies ahead better than we do.

In order to recreate the inside of a movie house as the setting for *Double Feature*, the scene shop crew dismantles a decrepit movie house from the town of New Haven. It is mostly fun until I destroy my right big toe by dropping a heavy platform directly on it. I have been advised to always wear steel-toe shoes but since I am not a union stagehand, I am free to take whatever risks I choose. My toe remains twisted and stunted to this day. It is one of several lifelong souvenirs from my time in the theatre.

We learn more from director Nichols in a separate production meeting on the set of *Watch on the Rhine*. He invites us to sit cross-legged on the carpet as he recruits our support for his new show, *Double Feature*. Asking us to sprawl out on another director’s set is a clear indication of how much at home Nichols feels here at Long Wharf.

One Sunday night, early in November following the final performance of *Watch*, I participate in my first strike for Long Wharf. We clear the stage for load-in of the new show that’s scheduled for tech rehearsal later in the week. The time needed for breakdown of one play and setup of another, along with the necessary technical rehearsals, requires dramatic adjustments in our work schedules. Workdays start early, adjourn about midday, then start up again at midnight.

The schedule is grueling. But through it all, we are commended and encouraged. Designer Walton compliments our grit and apologizes for the demanding timetable. Near our completion of the *Double Feature*setup, as scenery depicting the interior of an empty theatre replaces what hours before had been the elegant appointments of a World War II-era middleclass American home, Nichols tells us, “You guys have worked a miracle.”

Once tech rehearsals begin, the carpentry crew hands over the set to scenic artists, props pros, and stage managers. Again, there is time to explore our surroundings. As unabashed tourists, Joanna and I take advantage of breaks and rehearsal schedules. Though our responsibilities are diﬀerent, when our downtime overlaps, we find ways to make the most of it.

One spectacular Saturday, we attend the annual Yale-Harvard football game in New Haven. The New England fall air is crisp. Crimson- and blue-colored confetti falls in our hair. Harvard beats Yale at the Yale Bowl in a classic collegiate upset. Each ticket costs us four bucks.

*Double Feature* is a sellout, probably because of all the big names. But it does not gain Broadway traction as hoped, possibly because it comes so close on the heels of *Watch on the Rhine* which is booked for Broadway in the coming year. Times Square’s appetite for Long Wharf productions is currently satisfied. That’s okay with me. Our next main stage show, *The Beach House*, is already scheduled for two runs, one at home and one before an international crowd.

The play was written by Connecticut native Nancy Donohue, and the cast features two names soon to be highly recognized by TV watchers. Edward Herrmann is the lead. He will later distinguish himself in many roles—he is often cast as Franklin D. Roosevelt—and in his later years will play the father on *Gilmore Girls*. As with William Devane being cast as Bobby Kennedy, Herrmann becomes a pseudo-FDR to push along his career. The eﬀervescent Swoosie Kurtz, who plays Herrmann’s daﬀy love interest in *The Beach House*, will go on to win an Emmy and two Tony awards, frequently reprising this role. There is irony in this summertime fluﬀ debuting in the dead of winter. Or maybe not.

Months before, during my interviews with my soon-to-be boss at LWT, I told Dave of my interest in the Olympic Games. His face lit up at this revelation.

“That’s interesting,” he said. “We’re sending a team to the Olympics.”

“Wow. That *is* interesting,” I said, then ask, “Moscow?”

“No. A little closer,” he told me.

It turns out the Olympic team Dave was speaking of is the cast and crew of LWT’s production of *The Beach House*. I learn much later, after accepting the LWT oﬀer, that I will be point man for this Olympic entry, a six-performance run in Lake Placid, New York. It is part of the cultural activities associated with the XIII Olympic Winter Games of 1980 and hosted by the National Fine Arts Committee of the Games. Our run in New Haven’s meat-packing district home at Long Wharf Theatre is just a warm up for an international audience. I’m not sure how we qualified for this competition but I am psyched to be selected as its technical director.

1980 is already oﬀ to a great start and it’s not even here yet. *Watch* will open on Broadway. I will not miss that. Then immediately after, I will strike out through New York’s Adirondack Mountains to lead the LWT tech crew to Lake Placid for a brief run of *The Beach House* during the Games. This stage monkey is swinging high on the vines and gaping like an ape at all the glamour, celebrity, and great theatre that surrounds him.