Let the Games Begin

New York, 1980

The new year starts with the Broadway opening of *Watch on the Rhine*at the John Golden Theatre on January 3, 1980. I have come to see how union stage carpenters have replicated the set I executed with my team at LWT. I consider this my first Broadway show after becoming a stage hand. The cast is the same as in New Haven; so, too, are the costumes, props, and set—although union constraints require a redo of our set by “professionals.” I am not insulted. My team crafted the original. Joanna and I have opening night tickets. I am thrilled for once to wear a jacket and tie.

I am spellbound by the show but more by the location than the familiar lines. Afterward, we make our way directly to Sardi’s restaurant to await the reviews. They are terrible. Through the years, I have fantasized about admiring Lillian Hellman in a full-length mink from across the restaurant, but now I doubt that will happen. This rendition of *Watch* has one of the shortest runs ever at this theatre. I don’t care. I get to see Madge the Manicurist live on Broadway. And I now have a new credit for my resume: construction foreman for the Broadway-bound revival of *Watch on the Rhine* by Lillian Hellmann.

For the second time in forty years, Lake Placid will host the best skaters, skiers, and sledders from around the world. Following an ancient Olympic tradition, Long Wharf Theatre, along with other cultural contributors is invited to participate in the Games as a cultural complement. The original Olympics held in ancient Greece featured competition in poetry, song, dance, and athletic prowess. With cast and crew totaling twenty-four, our Long Wharf party is about the same number as a medium-sized country’s oﬃcial Olympic squad. With little fanfare and next to no preparation, I am appointed the touring production’s technical director for our on-the-road production of *The Beach House.*

This romantic comedy is set on the coast of Connecticut and takes place during the steamy days of summer. Directed by local Yale Alumnus Austin Pendleton and featuring future Tony- and Emmy-award winners Edward Herrmann and Swoosie Kurtz, the love story is quirky, funny, and sweetly sad. How it is right for this particular venue I am not sure, nor do I have time to question.

Despite a successful preliminary five-week run in New Haven, this touring version is fraught with problems from the get-go. As late as two weeks before the scheduled opening in Lake Placid, a *New York Daily News* article sends a tremor of dismay through our crew.

The piece reports that the Olympic Fine Arts Committee is in serious financial trouble and considering scratching a number of cultural events. This is particularly unsettling for the newly formed road crew who has been selected and prepped for the venture with previous responsibilities redistributed. With no touring production, there is concern there will be no paychecks. Though this proves to be false, some speculate the possible cancellation was leaked to catalyze release of funds by recalcitrant Olympic arts administrators.

On a Sunday night, scenery, props, and set dressing for *The Beach House* are loaded directly into a forty-foot semi-trailer rather than going to the dumpster. People are surprised that the magic elements of a live stage production—with a few obvious exceptions, such as vintage costumes or antique set pieces—are mostly thrown or given away at the end of a run. Much of the magic of theatre is its ephemeral nature, a tradition that goes back thousands of years.

The next day, a typical “dark” Monday in the theatre world when there are no performances, we are on our way to the Olympic Games. Security for entry into the venue is rigid. Precise manifests of all objects relating to the setup and running of the show—tools, props, scenery, costumes, and makeup—precede the arrival of our truck and vans by many days. In addition, restrictions on vehicles into the Lake Placid vicinity require all large vehicles to operate only between the hours of midnight and 6:00 A.M.

Transferal of the production from the well-received “tune-up” performances on LWT’s thrust stage—where the acting space is surrounded by audience on three sides—to the more traditional proscenium stage—where a big “picture frame” divides the acting space from the audience—in Lake Placid is actually facilitated by what is normally considered a constraint. Cramped construction facilities at the home theatre in New Haven preclude assembly of major set pieces before load-in. We are skilled at modular construction and quick assembly. It sure helps here.

Additionally, standard compressed scenery set-up time, which typically takes a day-and-a-half from the strike of the previous production following the final performance to the first tech rehearsal for the next production, precludes any wholesale building of sets on stage. As a consequence, LWT sets are almost always totally modular. Framing and legging come with cross-bracing, platforms with facings, and all moldings and finish details are already in place. Though usually these details are regretted by construction crews, in this case, they contribute to making the move of *The Beach House*an eﬃcient aﬀair.

Setup goes smoothly, as do technical rehearsals. But my professional uncertainty—as LWT’s freshly minted, first-time touring production technical director—causes me great personal anxiety. For this reason, I decline the free Opening Ceremony ticket I am oﬀered when the Games oﬃcially commence on February 13. It’s a painful decision but I do manage to take advantage of other opportunities.

For instance, I watch Team USA speed-skating phenomenon, Eric Heiden, win five individual gold medals in multiple events. I learn by bartering and swapping unique souvenir Olympic lapel pins that Soviet Army oﬃcers in military caps and full-length fur coats are not maneaters. And I am able to freely attend Olympic competitions in 1980, the same year that many other American sports fans are disappointed when President Jimmy Carter joins the boycott of the 1980 Summer Games in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Plus, I get to watch an early-round hockey game on the same rink where the United States men’s team will claim the gold medal in a thrilling underdog win. The world will remember this emotional victory at Lake Placid against the heavily favored Soviet team as the “Miracle on Ice.”

And these Games are a “Miracle Beneath the Lights”for me. I know of no other stage monkey who can claim participation in an Olympics as a unique theatrical credit. My ability to tie a bowline, double the mechanical advantage of a block and tackle, stiﬀen a flat, secure a drape, and load and oﬀload a truck full of stage gear brings me here to this special place at this special time. I win no medals, but upon arriving back in New Haven, I receive big congratulations from my boss, Dave, for returning with all his tools. And this monkey is soon to learn that basic stagecraft can take one even further and much, much farther.