That Image of Magnificence

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When asked to deliver the first Fellows Address at the newly formed College of Fellows of the American Theatre, I was filled with doubts and misgivings. When I expressed these in some detail, I was told that what was wanted was an enthusiastic, inspirational address which would reaffirm those ideals which are an integral part of this organization and its distinguished Fellows. This, I was told, they knew that I could do - besides at this late date they had no one else. So, here I am with great pride and infinite humility attempting to inspire those who have inspired thousands over the years. To attempt this I can only speak from my heart and personal experience. I can only try to express the fire which has driven me over the years, and still drives me in my so-called retirement. Perhaps, this will warm you as well and stoke your fire. I sincerely hope so.

In taking off the harness which tied me to so many organizations and institutions, a number of things became clearer to me. First, I more clearly understood that the ego of an administrator can match or exceed that of any actor or director. As I stood in the lobby of the theatre which had just been given my name and admired the plaque with its physical likeness and glowing words, I noticed two young coeds standing nearby doing the same. One said to the other, "My mother mentioned him. She had him in class. I wonder where he's buried?" I had to laugh; the bubble had burst. I stepped forward and told the coed, "Right here, my love, right here." Robert Browning wrote a fine poem about this. Soon, I had my second clear recognition. So many of the programs and organizations which I had poured my labor and love into establishing vanished when I did. The MacArthur Center now is dead storage except for the video tapes of great American theatre movements which I still cherish; the State Theatre system; the Jekyll Island Music Theatre are all gone. The Asolo, the Institute, the School of Theatre go on their way without me. So what endures? I believe that I have found that. What endures is what was planted in my soul more than fifty years ago. What endures is what has been passed on to light the fire in the souls of countless young people. Not me. I will soon be forgotten. What can not be forgotten are the ideals, the dreams, the love, the mission of the art of theatre which makes it worth a lifetime of intense labor and struggle. What endures for me is finding in the eyes, the hearts, the work of countless former students for whom I have been a conduit, of the truths, the dreams, the love of theatre bequeathed to me. Now, they must pass it on and continue the never ending struggle to bring the healing balm of theatre to more and more people.

I am an idealist, a dreamer, a romantic if you will. But then I have been nourished the most in theatre from those who were so plagued. Mark Van Doren taught me never to shy away from the attempt to fully define the wondrous concept of love. For in that concept, defined and applied, is the foundation of all art and indeed the motivation for one's life and one's art. I produced and directed two of Mark's plays and found in these as well as his poetry the living embodiment. More important to me than all the factual knowledge and skills is the search for and embodiment of a concept of love which drives the artist to strive to illuminate for his fellow beings the beauty, the wonder of life and the understanding of each other; thus discovering the common bond that makes us one.

Very early in high school I debated a career in the ministry or theatre, which attracted me so much. When I listened to Robert Edmond Jones lecture and read his book, which became my bible, I knew which temple I wanted to enter. How fortunate that I could find the mission enunciated like a clarion call by Harold Clurman, Stark Young and Joseph Wood Krutch to name but a few who lit my fire. I knew then what I wanted to do. I knew even then that there were money-changers in both temples and that there were battles ahead. Perhaps, I leaned a little too close to Don Quixote, but the dreams were not pipe-dreams as I could touch them with so many who surrounded me in theatre. I turned away from a furtive start in New York radio and theatre to educational theatre when my father's former classmate, Milton Smith, counseled me. He led me to a vision of bringing about the dream I had for theatre by leading universities to support professional theatre and nurture the audiences and artists of the future. I shall always be thankful for that advice. As a missionary of sorts, I came to Florida. I brought my bible and over the years dozens and dozens of theatre greats from Howard Bay to Van Doren, Clurman, Strasberg, Hayes, Houseman, Saroyan, etc. to inspire the young people. Like all missionaries, I find the mission far from
established, however, those that have gone forth carry the torch and are hopefully lighting fires as well.

Perhaps, this is the main mission of this College and all of us. We must keep alive the heritage and the sacredness of the temple. The future must have this bedrock foundation. We must keep the dreams and ideals alive in the young. They must not have the quest beaten out of them by the ruthless hardness of their world. Having been raised in the Great Depression and having endured world wars and disillusionment myself, I can appreciate what the young confront. I am also aware of the rich American theatre that came out of those times. They must also be made aware, and know that the theatre envisioned by Jones is needed now as never before. I met with our students every week. I preached love and the need to care for each other as we reviewed the continuing struggle. I always ended by reminding them that they must keep inviolate some image of magnificence in their souls to share with others in the theatre as Robert Edmond Jones implored. The fact that over 350 have remained together in New York with an equal number in Los Angeles to assist each other, and that over 20 theatres have been begun attest to this love as they greet me always with the assurance that their image still exists.

The realization of a theatre envisioned by Jones, Clurman and all the others who inspired me depends upon playwrights who have that image of magnificence within them and the love outlined by Mark Van Doren as well as the ability to embody it in a theatre work. The new writers need to be inspired by the great writers who have gone before them. It is sad to me that we have neglected our great American playwrights. We must not allow the fate of Tennessee Williams or William Inge to befall our distinguished playwrights. We have a rich heritage which is so neglected. Writers whose work is out of print and rarely performed. There are still among us writers who have won international acclaim and still have something to contribute who are almost completely ignored. Why is it that the work of great painters and graphic artists is preserved in museums, galleries as well as libraries while playwrights who are the giants of our art are not kept and treasured? Why are the works of the great composers done regularly by the great symphony orchestras while our American playwrights are ignored as being dated? No great American theatre work is ever dated to me, as the universals with which it deals can only be enriched by the date and time of their applications. The waste and neglect of this talent are an indictment of all of us in theatre. Perhaps some of you would like to join me in a project which I am trying to put together with Roger Stevens to deal with this on a national level. Audrey Wood and Helen Hayes both inspired me to try to find some answer for the sake of our future, and to give the theatre an equal status with the other arts by revering our rich American heritage in drama.

So, the Temple to Man is no more perfect than the Temple to God. Humankind needs both even in their imperfections. We need artists prepared to serve and audiences who know how to receive. We need enough temples to serve our large nation. We need due attention to those who have given us our past as well as to those who will give us our future. Those who enter the profession must see their service as vital to humanity as that of a physician. Eugene O'Neill may have expressed it best: "I am not in love with Life because it is pretty. I am a greater lover than that. I find Beauty even in Life's ugliness." What a gift to offer the audience! To reach for the resources to present that gift, perhaps one must follow Robert Edmond Jones to "keep in your soul some image of magnificence." All of you have been an inspiration to me when my dreams were dim and the image flickered. With me, now, hold onto your dream. We're needed! Polish that image - and pass it on.