

THE PROVINCETOWN THEATRE WORKSHOP  
RAY MARTAN WELLS

Provincetown, Massachusetts

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Gentlemen:

The Provincetown Theatre Workshop wishes to perform Marat as a benefit to local community organizations such as THE FINE ARTS WORK CENTER, The DROP-IN CENTER, THE STUDENTS COUNCIL etc. etc. for at least three performances in early March.

Please advise us what your minimum royalty arrangement would be. This will be performed in our local Art Association building.

Please address replies to:

Ray Martan Wells  
Provincetown Theatre Workshop  
Miller Hill, Provincetown  
02657

Very truly yours,

*Ray M. Wells*  
Ray M. Wells

*P.S. Amateur, of course*

# THE EARLY DAYS OF THE PROVINCETOWN THEATER COMPANY

By Charles Horne



In the fall of 1971, at the fair age of twenty-five, I abandoned my three-piece suit, along with a promising career in international banking, and moved to Provincetown. Finally my father's prophecy was fulfilled: I would indeed die in a gutter, and my parents would have wasted their money on my college education. What future could a sandbar offer to the recipient of a Masters Degree in Germanic Languages and Literature? I answered that question by presenting them with a copy of Baba Ram Das's *Be Here Now*, a book that only convinced them that I was truly lost. I really didn't care what they thought anymore. An old lady psychic had looked in her teacup and seen me in Provincetown. That was all I needed, that authorization. I literally walked out of my Boston apartment, left most of my possessions behind, and moved to Provincetown. I have never regretted it. For the first time in my life, I felt fully free. Granted, I still was "tortured" by my inability to write the Great American Novel, but even that exquisite torture disappeared as I became initiated into off-season life on the Lower Cape. It didn't matter to me whether I "wrote" or attended the Free U or swept the floor at the To Be Coffeehouse. My life was perfect. By day I walked along deserted beaches, by night I haunted Piggy's.

This was my spiritual winter, during which I was busy "transcending my ego." By the time first call for *Marat/Sade* rolled around, I had decided that even the desire to be an ar-



tist was impure. When a friend requested that I go with her to audition, I refused. Please understand that I was born with sawdust in my blood. At age two, I needed little prompting to get me to recite "The Night Before Christmas." At age ten, I staged impromptu back-yard shows. In high school and college, I'd drop everything for the opportunity to be in a play. But not in that "spiritual" winter of 1972. No, now theater had become a bastard art, a brazen ego-attachment, a kind of public masturbation.

My insistent friend, who tried to drag me to auditions, was Bonnie Horwitz. (She would later play Charlotte Corday and assassinate me.) Bonnie and I were part of a mini-commune known as "Absurd Lives for Peace"—the name had been suggested to us by friends in Cambridge who called themselves "Wasted Lives for Peace." Unlike our urban friends, we were "absurd" because we tried to do more than get stoned and listen to records, even if by "more" we meant nothing more than restoring an old Colonial house in exchange for rent. A year later, these same "wasted" compatriots moved to Provincetown and I cast them all in *Peter Pan*. A number of them are still active members of the Theater Company today. But in 1972, it wasn't the Theater Company; it was merely a theater workshop, and Edmond Di Stasi's proposal for a full-scale production of *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade* was greeted with grave reservations.

"It's crazy!" insisted Ray Wells, who later became Edmond's assistant director, "Where do you expect to find all the actors?"

"They're already here," Edmond answered for all of us waiting in the wings.

On a snowy Sunday night in December, Bonnie Horwitz victoriously dragged me to first call. At least sixty other actors sprawled on the floor of the Art Association. My resistance dissolved. The tension and phoniness which had made me hate theater, especially auditions, was completely absent from that room. The audition looked and felt like a Be-In. Edmond gestured around the room, saying, yes, there were principal roles to be assigned, but not until we had become inmates of the Asylum of Charenton.

Recently Edmond reminded me that "first call" is an old theater term: it is the first call a stage manager gives to actors on the night of a performance. Indeed, that first night of auditions was the first of many performances that led straight to opening night and beyond. For most rehearsals we had large audiences. From the start, the play belonged as much to the audience as to the actors, actor and audience sharing a combined fiction. All of us were part of that failed revolution known as the Sixties. We migrated from the city to the country, and extended the freedom of our



youth into adulthood; yet we could not avoid the painful reality that the Sixties were ours. We had been shouting the *Marat/Sade* battle cry for years, and now, whether we were ready to face it or not, the political revolution was dead. It began to die with the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Nixon's election turned the knife. The last gasp came at Kent State, which was the funeral of the revolution. Maybe that is why this 1972 Provincetown production had more poignancy for me than the events in the tumultuous decade before. Then, we were too close to the revolution; now, with the passage of time, we could express it better.

In the wake of the old one, another revolution was forming, a personal revolution shared that winter by every exile in Provincetown. Each of us sought ways to overthrow our own personal tyranny. *Marat/Sade* gave us the means. Three times a week, from the first of January to the end of March, we practiced the freedom of insanity. There was method to our madness, not chaos. We spent the first hour doing "isolations," a series of physically demanding exercises based on Grotowski's "Plastiques," in which we had to limit our movement solely to one portion of the body: an elbow, an eye, a shoulder. This accomplished, the "principals" went to the back room where Ray Wells pounded heavy-duty Stanislavski into our systems, while Edmond worked with the others with music. Later, we all were reunited in the front room of the Art Association (the most fertile space for theater I have known). Edmond would ask us to close our eyes and lie down on the floor. He told us, after a period of silence, that we would open our eyes back in time, in the nineteenth century asylum at Charenton. When he snapped his fingers and we opened our eyes, we were there. Softly, in the background, Edmond suggested that some of us were religious zealots, others were atheists. (Guess which I chose!) Suddenly someone would appear with a cross. Without prompting from Edmond, the zealots began their twisted version of a Gregorian chant, while the atheists kicked at crosses. If a zealot resurrected himself as Christ, an atheist crucified him. All the rehearsals had one thing in common: each one was never the same. We rehearsed what we would never repeat.

Psychologists say that insanity is a learned behavior. It is true that we were learning to be insane. There were risks involved. Edmond reminded us incessantly that this was only a play. He was not being over cautious: we were shocked to discover that some of the brilliant work done in rehearsals was not acting at all, but the real thing. The Drop-In Center (for emotional and mental counseling) kept sending us their best basket cases on a regular basis, so we were blessed with a few genuine lunatics. Some worked out; some did not. More disturbing was evidence of our own insanity (assuming we were not crazy to begin with). I myself was cast as Marat, the paranoid maniac—type-casting, some would say. Within a month of rehearsal, I was convinced that Edmond, Bonnie, and Rodney Garbato (the Marquis de Sade), were conspiring to turn me into a different person. Remember: this was my "spiritual" winter, and I was prone to feeling contaminated, not only by the ego-worship of theater, but also by the obviously anti-transcendental rhetoric of Marat's revolutionary ideology. Things got so bad, I stopped talking to everyone, and two days before the opening I flew into a paranoid rage and dropped out of the production. In the middle of my rantings, I heard myself calling Rodney "Sade" and Bonnie "Corday." For the first time since first call, I began to worry seriously about my sanity. Around me, everyone was in tears, except Edmond, who was smiling. I ran from the stage, jumped into my hand-painted red-white-and-blue VW, and drove furiously to Race Point. The moon shone on the water, and I listened to the calming sound of the breaking waves. After a time I returned to the Art Association where I was welcomed with love and understanding.

*Marat/Sade* left a lasting impression on all of us, including the audience. Here was participatory theater in its finest hour—not only because the audience had a role to play (nineteenth century French aristocrats), but also because most of the audience had already been present at rehearsals and had become integrated with the process. They were participating in a community ritual, like the ancient Greeks. By opening night, the audience had perfected its part.

A week after the final performance, I was washing dishes at the To Be Coffeehouse. One

day, a guy came running into the kitchen, acting as if I were his long-lost best friend. I can't remember what he said, except that he was very animated and that he was convinced I understood him as no one had. I was about to tell him that I didn't know who he was, but then he called me "Marat." I realized he was not making any distinction between me, the hippy at the sink, and Marat, the historical hippy in the tub. I decided not to correct him. The play had been real to him, and besides, he was tripping on mescaline, I soon discovered. Ironically, the night he had seen the play was the sole night I toyed with the idea of dropping a little mescaline myself. I am glad I did not. If I had, I probably would not be able to report anything except that Ray Wells wore red at every rehearsal. I didn't need to trip. This was the formative experience of my life.

When I pick up my copy of the program for opening night, March 24, 1972, I am shocked to see that only a handful of us are still even associated with Provincetown—Edmond most of all! Many of us are dead: Nicky Wells, Mimi Weissman, Thom Robbio, Peter Team, Carla Andrade, Jonathan Perry—others I may not know about. This was only fifteen years ago. Most of us were in our twenties. At the risk of sounding crazy, I will say that *Marat/Sade* accelerated the process of Becoming. We became, and went. This is why we came to Provincetown in the first place. Everyone in that cast found a new direction in his or her life. On opening night, Edmond gave each of us a present and a card. He gave me a letter opener in the shape of a dagger. On my card he wrote, "This is only the beginning." For the Provincetown Theater Company, it was; for me, too. In the fifteen years since, I have never produced, directed, or written a play without trying to capture the magic, the mystery, and the truth of that unique 1972 production of *Marat/Sade*.

*Charles Horne has directed many plays for the Provincetown Theater Company. He is currently artistic director of the Landmark Theater in Syracuse, N.Y.*