

CHAPTER VII

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Work on the next program will always be beginning, while Al Carmines is still with the Judson Poets' Theater. "There are no plans other than to continue what we have been doing since 1961," he states.¹⁹²

As the Poets' Theater continues to function, however, it must face, and continue to avoid, the tendencies which have caused other off-off Broadway theaters to fail. "Most off-off Broadway theaters that don't survive fail for one of three reasons," states Carmines. "They become dominated by a propaganda group, they don't offer enough diversity, or their participants lack commitment."¹⁹³

The Judson Poets' Theater avoids the trap of propaganda because in Al Carmines it has an artistic director who will not let the Poets' Theater be used. He also controls the choice of plays and the variety of his selections prevents a steady stream of plays on one particular theme. Many plays produced at the Judson attack the Establishment and a variety of society's mores, but not in a consistent pattern.

¹⁹²Carmines, loc. cit.

¹⁹³Ibid.

"The playwrights, directors and actors have varying shades of political opinion and I have mine," explains Carmines, "but the Poets' Theater should not be used as a propaganda vehicle."¹⁹⁴ The Poets' Theater personnel may present propaganda theater elsewhere and can even use the Judson Church building, but not under the auspices of the Poets' Theater name.

A case in point was a protest against American involvement in Vietnam staged by five groups of actors on October 28, 1967. The protest was organized by New York University drama professor Richard Schechner and planned as a form of street theater. Three of the groups did versions of Robert Head's Kill Viet Cong and two did improvisations. The players met in the morning at five off-off Broadway theaters, including Judson Church, and then moved out to various parts of Manhattan to perform. They progressed successively from parks, to mass-media headquarters to major transportation terminals, performing before whatever people were present.¹⁹⁵

The significant fact is that, though Poets' Theater performers were among the groups, and the Judson Church was used as a meeting place, the protest was not associated with

¹⁹⁴Ibid.

¹⁹⁵Carter Braxton Horsley, "Killing the Cong in New York Streets, The Village Voice, November 2, 1967, p. 18.

the Poets' Theater. Carmines intends to adhere to this type of divorcement in the future.

Carmines' second point, concerning diversity, is illustrated by the failure of the Playwrights' Workshop Club founded in 1966 by 'Ntoni Bastiano in a Seventh Avenue loft. It closed within a year. In a post-mortem, Village Voice critic Robert Pasoli said:

Part of the club's problems has been its commitment to the naturalistic playwright; Bastiano says he started the club "as a protest against avant-garde and abstract theater." He seems to me thereby effectively to have cut off his theater from the animating spirit of off-off Broadway. If the traditional play has its place, it is the new forms and experiments that provide the milieu with its juice.¹⁹⁶

The Poets' Theater guards against lack of diversity by adhering to the principle under which it was founded. It has and will continue to serve as a theater which welcomes all kinds of new playwrights.

The commitment which Carmines thinks necessary to maintain the Poets' Theater thus far has been provided by the support of the Judson Church congregation, the sacrifices and dedication of the Poets' Theater personnel who work without pay, and the help of volunteers. As of this writing, there is no indication that this commitment will diminish in the future.

¹⁹⁶Robert Pasoli, "Post-Mortem of an Off-Off Broadway Casualty," The Village Voice, November 30, 1967, p. 18.

The spectre of commercialism which doomed off-Broadway as a center for theatrical development and experimentation also haunts the Judson, as it does other off-off Broadway theaters.

What happened to the original group which formed the Judson Dance Theater serves as a constant reminder. The Dance Theater had its origin in the 1962 spring session of a class in choreography taught at Merce Cunningham's studio by musician-composer Robert Dunn. Anything, Dunn told his students can be danced.

The class developed into a workshop that began meeting regularly at Judson Church that summer. The group held its first concert later that year and continued to perform through 1965 when, as Al Carmines says, "the dancers got famous. Invitations started coming in from all over the world. Some of them became choreographers for mainstream ballet companies."¹⁹⁷

Today the original group is split apart into solo acts and smaller groups or companies which unite with each other occasionally for special concerts at Judson. Individuals often participate in Poets' Theater productions.

Judith Dunn, one of those who "split off," recalls

¹⁹⁷ Douglas M. Davis, "The Scope of the New Dance," The National Observer, June 26, 1967, p. 20.

those early days as a kind of Golden Age. "We were all young and full of vitality. I remember one program with seventeen choreographers and thirty pieces on it; never in the history of American dance were so many given the chance to try new ideas."¹⁹⁸

The Judson Dance Theater still flourishes with other dancers who have come to the Judson since the dispersal of the first group, and the Dance Theater is an important and vital part of the Judson arts program. What happened to that first group remains as an object lesson, however, for the Judson Poets' Theater has received some of the same kind of attention which caused the original dance group to disperse.

On the wall of Al Carmines' office hang citations from some of the eleven Obies won by the Judson Poets' Theater in the last four years. Ironically, these Obies are the same theater awards the Village Voice was giving to off-Broadway offerings in the fifties. The temptations of the kind of fame and success achieved by Edward Albee, who was part of that original off-Broadway movement, are not easy to resist.

For example, three plays first performed at the Poets' Theater were optioned for later runs at commercial theaters. The Obie award-winning Home Movies, a 1964 Poets' Theater

¹⁹⁸Ibid.

production, moved to the Provincetown Playhouse and played seventy-two performances there. Gorilla Queen graduated from experimental performances at the Poets' Theater to a commercial engagement at the Martinique Theater.¹⁹⁹ In Circles moved to the Cherry Lane and is still playing there.

All three moves brought the attendant publicity and awareness of box office "success" that the Poets' Theater does not court nor want. For it is conceivable that future playwrights might come to the Poets' Theater with visions of potential box office count and widespread reviews, visions which would run counter to the very reasons for which the Poets' Theater was founded.

This line of thought is not pure conjecture, as evidenced by what happened during the Poets' Theater production of The Line of Least Existence in March of 1968. Written by Rosalyn Drexler, who had authored the award-winning Home Movies in 1964, the play was optioned for commercial production while it still was being rehearsed for the Poets' Theater production. Home Movies, Gorilla Queen, and In Circles were optioned after their productions at the Poets' Theater.

The change was disastrous. It is far easier to cope with the indirect pressures that come after a production is

¹⁹⁹"Gorilla Queen Gets Theater," The New York Times, March 29, 1967, p. 37.

over than with direct pressures which arise during a production. "The news that The Line of Least Existence had been optioned made everyone nervous," states Art Levin, who assisted with the production. "The author became overly concerned, the director and actors were self-conscious."²⁰⁰ It is not inconceivable that the author was affected by visions of future fame or that the actors were tempted by thoughts of steady jobs. After all, the actors who had appeared in In Circles at the Poets' Theater were getting paid for the same performances at the Cherry Lane.

"News of the option must have spread," explains Levin. "We found out in advance the play was going to be reviewed by major critics and the attention increased. Tension mounted and I believe it affected the performances. The letdown will be even worse if nothing comes of it. If this happened with every production, everything the Poets' Theater stands for would be destroyed."²⁰¹

Increasing attention also might affect the kind of audience the Poets' Theater attracts. No statistical study

²⁰⁰ Interview with Art Levin, director of the Judson Youth Center and its drama program and frequent stage manager for Poets' Theater productions, March 22, 1968.

²⁰¹ Ibid. Mr. Levin explained that previous reviews, other than those of The Village Voice, usually occurred when a critic of a major newspaper or magazine heard about a production after the first few performances were over and came down on his own to have a look.

has been made of the people who make up the audiences, but a few generalizations can be surmised. People who will risk a climb to a seat in the dusty Judson loft, or sit on a hard folding chair in a drafty sanctuary for several hours, do not attend the Poets' Theater for status or a "gala evening." They pay no admission, so the Theater believes it owes them nothing except the visual, intellectual and emotional experiences offered by the production. The Poets' Theater wants and needs the kind of audience that is open to new ideas.

Although it is a focal point of information about the off-off Broadway theater, The Village Voice continues to review its plays in a sporadic manner. Not all the plays are reviewed and the reviews are often published after a play's run is over. This policy has applied to the Poets' Theater.

What will happen if these occasional reviews of Poets' Theater productions continue to be supplemented by more and more reviews and articles in mass-media newspapers and magazines? Will the audience come to examine the Poets' Theater as a curiosity piece or to find out "what everyone is talking about," or which critic is right? Will the audience become the playwright's master instead of his responsive tool?

These are some of the problems and questions the Poets' Theater must face as it looks to the future. On the one

hand, it must continue to avoid tendencies toward propaganda, lack of diversity, and loss of commitment. On the other hand, it must learn to cope with pressures that come with increasing prominence. What a paradoxical situation in American theater! Here we have a theater whose productions merit the attention of some of the country's leading periodicals, as this study's bibliography will attest. Yet this very attention is the major threat to its future existence.