

# Life with Peter

## A discussion of the Princeton Atelier

C. Scott Ananian

April 12, 1996

The Princeton Atelier has been one of those few classes that has succeeded in breaching the barrier of facts and knowledge and truly educating me. It has changed the way I view and interact with issues and ideas: rather than augmenting my intellect, it rearranged it. The salon discussions of the Atelier walked with me out of the classroom everyday to converse with my outside life.

### **1 Outside**

The most significant moments in the Princeton Atelier often occurred outside of class time. Whether we were on one of Peter's numerous 'field trips' or simply chatting to him after-hours in the Murray-Dodge Café, Peter encouraged us to re-examine and test the ideas brought up more formally in class. Expressions and concepts inspired by extra-curricular activity likewise found their way inside to inform our work.

Previous to Peter's arrival on campus, I had directed *Catastrophe*, a Beckett playlet. I brought some sense of the Beckettian world-view with me in my Atelier projects, and enjoyed a fascinating discussion with Peter about Beckett's approach to 'ideological' theatre. A symbol is not enough, Peter said. In order to move the audience, they need to care about the characters. *Waiting for Godot* achieves its power because the Didi and Gogo are real and believable, and you feel their longing for Godot. The observation seems obvious, but Peter had identified the weakness in the piece I was working on exactly.

My education in symbolic theatre technique continued in New York City at the Bread and Puppet Theatre, not long after. Another totally different approach to communicating important ideas — now 'story' was superseded by 'image': third-world nations masked to appear european, flapping wings they don't have in an effort to fly; the god of the West descending from the heavens and revealed to be lifeless; the giant ghosts of our ancestors looking on as we breathe.

And then after these jaunts into the city, and eventually every night, Peter would pour himself some herbal tea in the Café in the basement of Murray-Dodge hall and talk to us. He told us about Richard Foreman's work, as vicarious eyes for those of us unable to have been physically present. He talked about the Princeton culture in which we lived, and his dreams for changing the ideals of the coming generation. He talked of power structures coming and going, of life-meaning, of the need to aspire to more than 'ivy-league graduate.'

And when the final performance of the Princeton Atelier was complete,

we walked away witnesses of theatrical power, seeking to recapture those moments in the following productions which would involve us. The final sincere moments of the atelier piece because the final-scene goal for ‘Daughters of Survival,’ the week following, as we sought to involve the audience as deeply with the stories of the last remaining survivors of the Holocaust as they were with our Atelier reflections. And the cycle of taking the thoughts sown by Peter and reaping them in performance, in reflection, and in our lives continued.

## 2 Inside

The group explorations were undoubtedly the motive key to Peter’s time here. Both the first exploration of dreams and the second opportunity for unbridled creativity were chances to work independently on whatever caught your fancy — the very freedom of the goal could be overwhelming at times. “But what does he *want?*” we would wail to ourselves, as we confronted the blank paper with fear. Some groups quickly found niches and worked intensely on material which completely involved them. Others wandered more slowly, being pushed by conflicting leaders’ voices towards paths less attractive than the ones they desired, but could not attain.

Vanessa and I completely immersed ourselves in our first project, working seemingly non-stop from the time it was assigned to the moment we set foot ‘on stage’ in front of Peter. Hours were spent talking of dreams, tossing around dramatic ideas, and rehearsing, modifying, and nurturing our piece, to the exclusion of all else. We both felt that ultimately we were able to

perform exactly the piece we wanted to perform, telling the audience what we wanted to hear, in a way that way comfortable to us both. But after hours of under-surface construction, we were disappointed that Peter didn't want to *hear* about our work – we had so much to say, to explain, to discuss! Of course, we never could have seen everyone's work in the time provided had we taken the time to stop and let the subtext pour out of each of us, and ultimately our consolation was the knowledge that we *did* it. We performed our piece. We said what we had to say. The audience would take as much as they understood, for better or worse, but the burden of communication had been transferred.

The second group got started a little more slowly, since I was now thrown in with people I didn't know as well, and we all had to feel out each other's positions, ideas, hopes and goals. As we began to communicate more freely, the piece as well became more fluid — ideas we had discussed previously were abandoned for radically different ones, and we left each rehearsal with some idea of the goal and some idea of the state, but no concept of trajectory. We had agreed early on that we would concentrate on Scabby Turtle, since each one of us agrees that there were many sides to be seen in this single multi-faceted character. Eventually we began to exchange and modify our turtle-views, bleeding into each other and away from the text, until we could only claim Scabby Turtle as inspiration, not supporting fact. As well, we began to evolve different ideas that captured our attention, and our group of directors began to create its own individual sub-pieces. This was an ideal arrangement, as each one of us could contribute his talents as actor to enable the others to try their hands at direction.

The piece we presented to Peter at the first showing was forcibly tied together, because we thought we “ought” to have a single coherent piece, instead of allowing ourselves to explore the issues that interested us individually. Our showing was a great experience: we each went away feeling that we’d learned something personally, and could continue developing our individual pieces. As such, the pieces continued to diverge: Peter’s comments to me encouraged me to rewrite the piece (repeatedly), aiming for a better grip on the use of symbol in the theatrical space; likewise the other members of the group began to work on their personal challenges more earnestly.

The final night performance was indescribable, though I’ve tried to set words to paper about it above. Peter exercised his genius in a way almost beyond my comprehension to bring us all together into a shared space that ultimately deeply touched each of us and the audience as a whole. The experience of the closing moments of performance is one which I am destined to attempt to recreate for as long as I continue working in the theatre.

### **3 Thoughts at the Edge**

The Atelier has its frustrations, as any work does. In many ways it was as much (or as little) as one chose to make of it. On my part, I felt like I learned even more from Peter’s out-of-class activities than I did working on the group project — and that probably reflects to some degree my respective time commitments. It’s a lot harder to get a group together to work on a piece than it was to corral Peter and talk things through. But at the edge, looking back, I have a great sense of accomplishment and education — my

time in the Atelier was time truly well spent.