



See a Show: Learn to Lead



By Ed Rudin, MD

NO MATTER HOW CRUSHED physicians feel, no matter how much non-physicians expand their scope of practice, no matter how regulated and managed physicians are, no matter how tense interprofessional relationships get, doctors still direct the medical team in most of the care and treatment of patients.

Only the method has changed. Instead of the authoritarian leadership of bygone days, doctors now direct an ensemble of skilled specialists. The less the group has worked together the more it needs to huddle to decide who will do what and when. Sometimes the huddle is anarchic, sometimes democratic, and sometimes autocratic.

This struck me in the strangest of places, on vacation in my favorite nearby getaway, Ashland. As I noticed how the director influences a production, I wondered about how analogous theater and medicine, audience and patient, director and doctor were.

Let's see what happened in Ashland.

Handler plunges us into a maelstrom of faith in literal scripture and fear of God's mercurial tests. Playwright Robert Schenkkan discovered this in his research for *The Kentucky Cycle*.

Bill Rauch directed this West Coast premiere with the single, sinewy thread of passionate evangelism binding the diverse parts and a diverse audience. He captured us in the pre-show minutes, when the bass, drums and slide guitar drive the singing of "back home" hymns and "the congregants" assemble and reach out to each other and to the audience in a cordial, unpretentious welcome. He held us to the final desperate intimacy of the angry, guilty couple that is Everyman and Everywoman searching for answers and finding only questions and tests.

He got stellar performances from such veterans as Robin Rodriguez and Kenneth Albers, as they struggled with doubt and faith, and from Jonathan Haugen, who was new to us, but whose Geordi was taut with fear and fury, with radical rage and imprisoned guilt. The ailing Alice and the stammering Larry stood out in the convincing congregation.

Rauch released enough energy from the ensemble and the play to shatter any disbelief in the melodramatic handling of the snakes as commanded in Mark, the rising as of Lazarus, and the encounter with a Satanic man in the woods.

Rauch also made exemplary use of a new and creative staging in OSF's New Theater. The audience was on two sides of the "avenue stage," viewing both the stage and the audience on the other side. With audience and congregants so blended, the actors had to feel "the spirit" at all times. This they did, in a great performance of a great play.

Noises Off was directed by the same Kenneth Albers who portrayed the evangelical preacher in *Handler*. Albers put his hand on *Noises Off* and healed it. In Sacramento a few years ago, all the doors needed in a farce were there, as were the intrigues of a traveling

cast of has-beens and wanna-bes, but no one cared.

Here, Albers cared. He drew glittering performances: campy freezes, double-takes and double entendres from veterans like Dee Maaske, who remained steadily bewildered in her brushes with dotage as Dotty Otlery; and Michael Hume, who was both dolorous and fiery as the brusque director of an impossible cast, trying tactfully to contain his simmering rage while yearning to play *Richard the Third*.

Albers gave us an old Marx Brothers farce. He integrated the actors' inventions without slowing the farce-pace. He got Richard Howard, who failed me in *Night of the Iguana* a few years ago, to redeem himself as Frederick Fellowes and Becky-Meyer Corbett to reveal her "almost all" in contrived poses of dimpled allure and toothpaste smiles, wide-eyed surprise and seething jealousy.

Noises Off was as hilarious as it was meant to be. Albers gave us the meticulous timing and attention to detail that a farce requires so that everyone, cast, crew and audience, can have fun.

Macbeth inaugurated OSF's New Theatre. Libby Appel, the company's Artistic Director, led the production. She declares in the program that she was obsessed with the Macbeth family and "beguiled" for 15 years by the "supernatural elements" that doom this family. Now she is "deeply interested in the mind of the murderer." She wonders when "imagination and desire turn into action" and when "after our first free choice, does our path become absolutely inescapable?"

This "attitude" shaped her adaptation. She worked with dramaturg Lue Morgan Douthit to produce a 110-minute, one-act precis of the traditional 150-minute, three-act *Macbeth*. She staged it in the round, jettisoning the grandeur and eeriness, but failing to develop the intimacy such staging promotes. She had one actress play the first witch plus five other parts; another, the second witch plus five other parts, and a third, the third witch plus seven other parts. This blurring of characters left only Lord and Lady Macbeth and Banquo to play only themselves.

Other innovations, like daubing blood red hands or a dagger on a victim, were "beguiling" symbols, but lost the thrusting fury of the action.

To keep the tempo, actresses began or ended their costume changes while on stage, an intolerable shattering of the illusion on which theater depends. Everyone paid dearly for this stripped-down perspective. The characters had no depth and no intimacy with each other or with the audience. The sparse set and spot lighting were assets, but other innovations were not. Lord and Lady Macbeth, played by exceptionally able actors, could not carry this off. They became clumsy, unrelated stereotypes. Banquo did better. His heroics prevailed. The others worked hard and fast, but to little avail.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is theater my wife and I have avoided since we first saw it just before our critical seventh year of marriage. Who wants to get mud-splattered watching unremitting feral warfare between people like us?

In Ashland, after our 50th year of marriage, we took a chance. We saw and heard the raging Martha rape and castrate her George and the scholarly George poke and probe his Martha using all comers as foils. This time we also saw and heard their desperate need for each other, and for their foils and alcohol; their cries for rescue as well as destruction.

Edward Albee's complex, painful play contends that myth and illusion are used to reduce the pain in our lives, terrible as the exercise may be. His George is a professor of history who invents history and places people in games that perpetuate his history.

Director Timothy Bond got his actors to feel all of Albee - the exorcism and purification *and* the sadism. That was missing for me 50 years ago. The grandly talented Andrea Frye delivered a barren and bitchy Martha questing for closeness and Richard Elmore revealed

an exceptionally nuanced, game-playing George. Christine Williams was a perfect foil as the young, repressed newlywed and Jeff Cummings, seen recently in the Sacramento Theater Company's *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, dissolved before our eyes from a tightly controlled biologist and new husband to a blathering foil. The director helped his talented team find and feel the complexity the playwright intended, skipping nothing, and delivered an astonishingly enduring play.

Idiot's Delight is Robert E. Sherwood's challenge to war. Sherwood strands a group of international travelers at a hotel in the Italian Alps in 1936, when Europe is at a political crossroads. The Spanish Civil War is raging, Hitler's Anschluss of Austria has gone frighteningly easily. Mussolini has defied the League of Nations and conquered Ethiopia. He is sure he will join the war, but not yet sure on which side.

At first, it's a bit of a lark for the guests - a scientist, an armaments manufacturer and his mysterious Russian mistress, English newlyweds, a revolutionary, an American song-and-dance man and his bevy of chorines. Then bombs fall nearby and Sherwood's prophetic drama, part tragedy, part satire and part love story, unfolds. War is the *Idiot's Delight*.

Peter Amster, the director, chose to not update the story, betting the sophisticated lines would remain relevant. William Bloodgood, the set designer, gave him an awesome view of the strikingly beautiful, snowy Alps seen through a huge art-deco window that dominated the glittering art-deco lounge. On a brightly lit stage, Amster challenged Sherwood's characters to match that grandeur. They did. They evolved from disinterested, inconvenienced travelers to worried near-victims of the madness of war.

The director protected the brilliant script, and guided his actors to follow the playwright's directions with integrity and confidence. It worked because it takes as much courage now as in Sherwood's days to proclaim an anti-war, anti-authoritarian sentiment, whether of the left or the right.

Physicians serve on many complex teams, not always as leader or director, but always with a voice worth hearing. The doctor/patient relationship is a prime example. We can treat a disease or an injury autocratically, relying on our technical proficiency and knowledge, we can know "what is best" and order it, but we cannot heal without a more egalitarian alliance.

As the legislative year draws to a close, our successes and failures may be a measure of how well we have directed the political forces that must respond to ours and our patients' needs and interests. The legislature is surely a form of theater. Maybe the theater, then, can teach us how best to direct our medical policy interests.

edrudin@aol.com

Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society
5380 Elvas Avenue #100 • Sacramento, CA 95819
916.452.2671 PH • 916.452.2690 FX • Email: info@ssvms.org

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