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the second wave

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Womanhood**

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American Woman
Meets
"Emancipated"
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Linda: How did audience participation in the play come about?

Joe: In the very first play we did we went up and asked the audience. We did want to make that connection from the very beginning. The change of Aili asking an individual woman to go out was almost a spontaneous thing which she tried about a year ago.

Laura: Why did you say before that you didn't feel right about having two women break out together?

Aili: I don't think it's justified. The play is built so tightly that there needs to be either a new scene or



photo: Nadine Rosenthal

Mother and Father Raising Mary

a continuation to show how that happens. Right now, it's artificial. The burden is on Mary, acting-wise, to be able to make that transition.

Linda: That was what I meant about it being like Act I of a play, because where do you go out into?

Bobbi: We felt if we tried to define the outside that a lot of women could cop out by saying, "Oh, well, I do that; I have a job." Once we say something specific, we have women saying "That's easy." You don't deal with what breaking out means for you.

Aili: I sort of like the question that I'm left with, that one woman is so deeply stuck and has no hope and one woman has gone through things and chooses it without really knowing what is going to happen to her. It's like three parts of me, three choices or projections that I see.

Meredith: It really caught me up, that part about the child trying to get affection from the mother, and everyone pointing in other directions—"Go to Mommy," "Go to Daddy."

Bobbi: I feel we are so ill-prepared to be parents.

Meredith: This is a part of the production I don't remember as clearly—does she end up being as fucked up as her mother?

Aili: She's been programmed regardless of what she feels and she has these restrictions on her and is all uptight inside, about things she wants to do, feels

she has to do.

Bobbi: That scene is the clearest sociological scene. It shows the conditioning—how to walk, how to talk, how to control. When we first began, I thought that was the meat of it, that this thing happens to someone—it really is "how to make a woman." We did improvisations on building a person. It isn't something we're born with. Of course, we don't have to say that now, but the little girl is "made."

Aili: I felt the child always tries to please the father and is swayed in response to the father, more so than the mother. I don't think the mother makes any demands on the daughter the way we have it. The child wants affection from the father. In the movie "The Diary of a Mad Housewife," it sort of clicked, because the woman is always shown as incompetent and is mimicked. The children look up to the father and care nothing about the mother, because it's always shown how stupid she is, how frivolous, so they have no positive feelings about the mother.

Meredith: It's so vicious, because the child is always being directed back toward the mother, who is always sending the child off in another direction. There's another scene, in which the mother and daughter are kissing, which means that Mary and Aili are kissing. The first time I looked I saw mother and daughter, then I blinked and saw what I wanted to see, which was a homosexual relationship.

Bobbi: This is one respect where the play is still years ago. I don't think what you're looking for is in the play. I feel like I've always had a personal woman friend, but I haven't really identified as a woman or been close to women. After being in a women's collective, and being close to women at the theatre, and really going out of my way to be close to women, I feel that I now have good relationships with women. But at the time of the play, I really didn't. I feel that the women in the play really don't come together and that is one of the ways in which the play is out of date. I think that in real life, as we experience ourselves every day, women are much more together in terms of friendship than the women in the play. I didn't consider when I was working on the play being in a sexual relationship with another woman—not that it was bad, I just didn't consider it. And now with all the gay women around, I really feel I have these feelings and I can express them. But I didn't then and I don't see it in the play. This is one of the good things the women's movement has given us... I think one thing the play does do is that every situation with a man doesn't work out—it's one after another of frustrating situations; I don't think we say how things should be out there.

Stan: I feel that some of this discussion is factual—it's good, but it's not personal. The times that it's best for me are when it reminds me of something that actually happened to me and I could relate it to the experience of working with the play. I feel that Aili began to almost talk about herself. I don't know if she wanted to. But maybe

A Conversation With Caravan Theatre

How to Make a Woman has been performed before Boston audiences by the Caravan Theatre for five years, with increasingly enthusiastic reception. The play deals with the conditioning, both subtle and blatant, of women into roles of submission, subservience and sexual plaything. The play changed profoundly over the years; its most recent production was in the following form.

Two women, Aili and Mary, meet in a dress shop where two male dress designers and a third woman, the Mannequin, try to induce them to buy various "dresses" or feminine roles. Aili resists but Mary seems to be taken in, so Aili persuades her to make an inner journey, back to the beginning of her own life, and concurrently, of the human race. Various scenes depict the "building" of Mary as a female person who, while admiring her father's strength, is manipulated to emulate her mother's weakness and preoccupation with cleanliness and respectability.

She learns how to be a model housewife for the Hunter, reminding herself that it is important to "be good and sweet . . . to dust the phone . . . to be another's . . ." Rebellion against this leads to the trap of being a sex object for the Wolf, the other male character, who lures her then mistreats her.

These ill-conceived relationships are contrasted with two portrayed by Aili, one in which she dons the huge breasts of the Big Mama, who makes all the decisions, in response to a good-natured but irresponsible husband. A pseudo-liberated marriage also proves to be a failure. Aili must struggle to preserve a sense that her work is as important as her husband's—important enough to stay and finish, even if he moves on.

The Mannequin is transformed near the end into an old woman, forgotten by the men she had served and waited for all her life. She attempts to pass on her veil to Mary, representing the passing on of her servile role, but Mary refuses to look.

At the end, Mary has accepted the dress of plastic breasts, submitting to the role prepared for her by the dress designers. Aili asks, "Isn't there something else?" and when the answer is "No," smashes out of the dress shop into an ambiguous but less stifling outside world.

Participants in the following interview were: Joe Volpe, who played the Wolf; Bobbi Ausubel, the director; her husband Stan Edelson, who wrote the play; Aili Singer, who played the character of the same name; Peter Kovner, who played the Hunter; Winky Belz, technical director; Linda, Holly, Meredith and Laura are from *Female Liberation*.

Joe: The first that I ever heard about it was that Bobbi said, "I wanted to do something, do a play about women, something based upon some of my experiences." We got together before anything was written at all, just to talk about it.

Meredith: Were you friends before, or a theatre company?

Bobbi and Joe: A theatre company.

Joe: And friends.

Linda: The idea came out of your experiences, and then talking about it as a group?

Bobbi: I remember trying to explain to people why I thought it was valuable to do a play about women, to make them feel it was relevant to them — that was my plot. It's hard to know how to make men feel it was relevant, but everybody felt good about it.

Linda: Did you feel you had to put it over more to the men?

Bobbi: No, actually, they were very, very receptive.

Meredith: Timing-wise, was that when the first stuff was coming out in the media?

[A chorus of "no's."]

Bobbi: One and a half or two years before anything was out.

Linda: The first *Journal of Female Liberation* didn't come out until 1969.

Joe: We're talking about January 1967. The first performance was in June 1967.

Meredith: What were the first reviews—"revolutionary play . . . "?

Aili: Well, the theme was "trite," they consistently said. There were good things in the play, interesting things in the play, but unfortunately it was on such a trite subject.

Linda: I don't think that's their reaction today. When did it change? Did you notice the audience reaction changing?

Aili: I personally noticed a change when women's liberation became an issue; when women stayed to talk about it, we began to have discussions. We found at first that people critiqued the play and didn't talk much about the subject, just the structure of the play and what we did with it.

Bobbi: The interesting thing is what was the play like then, because we made a lot of changes, especially about the Aili character. We tried to contrast Mary as someone who was somewhat submissive with Aili who was exactly opposite. Aili was absolutely different then than she is now; Mary was somewhat the same. Aili wore a costume with spokes—sharp—blades—and was always cutting

we could go further into what the play means in terms of personal experiences. I guess I resist talking about it as a political experience only.

Linda: Would you like to come out with something?

Stan: I was just trying to think . . . the personal thing that happened to me as far as the play was, I feel, I was put on the spot by Bobbi by doing the play and I guess I feel it was a good spot. I feel she has become more of a person and a lot of it came through the play, and that made me feel that I had to do something in some way about myself. So about a year and a half ago some of the men at the theatre formed a men's group, and I guess with the advent of that I could relate much more to the value of the play. I always felt I had sort of a patronizing attitude toward the play in that I helped write it, but that was because Bobbi wanted me to and because I always felt women were pushed around. I really never understood what the hell that meant, and only lately I began to understand something about my mother, the first woman I knew, and how much she's been pushed around, by men, by my father.

Linda: And you?

Stan: Possibly me. A lot me. I've had some nice talks with her about that lately that I never could do before. I guess I'm beginning to re-see myself and that's why the play means something to me now, and I guess the most important part of the play to me is the discussions afterward. I see myself in the play, but I don't see myself. The men are not fully developed in the play, but in the discussions afterward, the men's groups. There is something having to do with me.

Holly: Did you start having them meet separately?

Joe: No.

Holly: Why did that evolve?

Aili: Because the men and the women couldn't talk.

Laura: Do you feel there's a better way of integrating men into the play, making them feel more comfortable with it, yourself included?

Stan: I feel it's a woman's play and that's the way it should be seen.

Laura: The discussion groups are then a really viable way of dealing with men?

Stan: Right. I think it's a shame not to have them get together again at the end, although I don't think we found that a good form because it always seems to dribble off. The men's groups, at least in my experience, start out wondering what the women are talking about.

Holly: And the women start out wondering what the men are talking about—that's what happened in the groups I went to.

Laura: Why don't you have them together at that point? Are they more inhibited?

Stan: I feel with the men, it's very hard for them to talk. I used to use real male tactics, I would be very provocative with the men and challenge them in different ways. I was all for making sure they got out their feelings because it's so hard to do that, so I got out my feelings. But I feel I was often

mechanical, manipulative, pouring out things to make sure other people poured out, put them on the spot. I don't like to do that any more. If you stay with it, they don't want to know what the women are talking about.

Laura: Have you tried to join the groups at the end?

Peter: The times I've been in that situation where people have said we could, there was a reluctance. There's a moment when all the men have set up a condition where they're going to say yes, but it seems like they really don't want to, that there's much more we want to say that we can't say with women.

Laura: What do you think that is? Are these metaphysical, philosophical, or body things?

Peter: Well, body things, shared experiences.

Laura: Dorm talk?

Peter: Almost, on a better level.

Joe: A good example was what happened at Trinity College, when Bobbi came in and said, "Do you want to mix?" And when she left one guy said, "I think it's fantastic that we're talking together. I feel relieved already." He had really had concerns about his role as a man and for the first time had talked about it with a group of men and it felt good, and that's an important thing. Of course, that didn't happen at the beginning of our discussions.

Laura: How about setting up something over a period of time—another discussion later on?

Aili: Bobbi and Stan do workshops [explorations of male-female roles and relationships] and I think that gives you another level to work with. Just talking, you get to the point of arguing—two-sided kinds of things. If the women want to know what the men are saying, I think we should respond to it, but in many groups they just don't care to. I think that if they say, "I'd like to talk to the

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You were a bowstring
I tugged with my girl's arm,
bred weak. You slapped my wrist
for being ignorant — you tell me
how it is to be a woman.

The gray cat my mother
let me keep, you left five
good red stripes
across my hand — you tell me
how it is to be a woman.

The summer my body turned
plumripe, tied up in a bikini,
a bee dived hard at my breast
and stung me — you tell me
how it is to be a woman.

Now I find hardshelled, bitter animals
in your eyes and hands,
they hide under rocks at low tide.
You have no loving without claws or teeth.
Even your words are flowers that bite
and only when kept and brewed can heal.

— Miriam Palmer

men," they're really saying, "Gee, I don't think I'm going to find anything with my own group. I want to hear what the other sex has to say."

Peter: I think it's very hard since it's a woman's play for the men to find anything to talk about.

Meredith: Do men recognize the ugly way they were portrayed?

Peter: I wish they would more than they do; they don't seem to.

Joe: I feel that men have very much identified with the play and there's been a great transition, because when we first had the discussions they were angry. I remember having these horrible arguments, people screaming across at each other, because it presented too painful an image. Or they would deny: "It's not like that at all." And that was the first stage of the discussions.

It's very important to say that the discussions were a very late addition to the experience of the play, and altered the tone of the play. The discussions helped me to change my character as the Wolf. For example, I really thought the men in the play the first time around were stupid. From the discussions I learned that the men weren't stupid, that the men in the audience reacted so strongly that there was something really, really there.

Reactions have changed since the early part of the women's movement, because the whole culture has changed, so that now, although men have a terribly hard time talking to men about themselves and would rather talk about women or men in the abstract, they are much more willing to talk about it than they were. Like yesterday, someone would say, "This is how I felt in that competitive situation" and would describe a personal situation.

It's important for the history of the play that the first discussion took place with a booking for a women's liberation group. Mary Daly and a women's liberation group had booked the play for an afternoon, and it was through her that we instituted the discussion group.

Bobbi: We had a panel after that performance which was very interesting: Roxanne Dunbar and Mary Daly and one other quiet New England woman. And Roxanne Dunbar walked out screaming, which was my first introduction to hostile women. I really got very scared when I met her and I always wanted to talk to her about that. She said we wanted to make money off of women's liberation. She didn't deal with it; she didn't stay and talk.

Mary Daly pointed out something interesting which has come up again and again. A lot of the humor in the play is still anti-woman. Now that peoples' consciousness is different I can hear the places that the women laugh and when the men laugh and when both are laughing. But it's still true that a lot of the jokes in the play are at the expense of women.

I feel that the men have tried to make living, breathing people out of the cardboard cartoons we gave them. I feel that my being in a women's group has been very helpful to Stan, that it's changed his

life. I slightly resent your saying I became more of a person. You didn't say you became more of a person. I feel it's a continuum of growing and that sort of bothered me.

Stan: I think you should go into it more.

Bobbi: I felt it was patronizing, and you were talking about being patronizing.

Stan: I need to be more clear about this, otherwise I don't understand.

Bobbi: I guess you felt after I had worked on the play I became more of a person, and I feel that comes up to the question of people calling women "girls" or "women." I talked to a man once who said "the three men and girl I work with had a meeting," and I said "Are the men boys?" and he said "'girl' is just a word you use." So I said okay but I asked him how he really felt about her, and it turned out he really did think of her as immature but I don't have a feeling that the men were that much more mature, necessarily. We talked about it and he said he didn't know women who were women, he said I was the only woman he knew which is a lot of bullshit. If a woman doesn't meet a certain standard, she isn't there. We all have so many places to grow. I do feel I know much more of who I am.

Stan: I guess that's what I was speaking to, but I fucked up in that I put the word person in. But I'm not sure who's fucking up who right now and I think that's pretty important. What I was thinking although it didn't come out of my mouth, was that you weren't using and relying on me anymore, like you used to.

Bobbi: And do you feel because you're dependent on me that you're less of a person now?

Stan: In some ways, yes.

Laura: You become one person when you spend a lot of time with another person, don't you? Do you feel that's a fault?

Stan: Yes. If I lose myself, it's bad for me.

Bobbi: Winky and I stayed last night and heard Betty Friedan—I'd never heard her or read her book, and she kept talking about women's liberation as part of human liberation, which is a nice way of looking at it, I think. I don't know how I'd feel about being the foil in a men's play, because I think women do a lot of awful things to men; I know I have.

Winky: I think women have very frequently been the foil. I think of *The Skin of Our Teeth* where the man has three types of women running around the wife-mother who is fucked over in all kinds of ways—she's boring but he needs her to do the dishes; the whore; and the daughter who is really naive and innocent and pure. There are all these stereotypes, but here is a man who has all these traumas about how to gain political power and love, and all these conflicts. I just think it happens over and over again, plays in which a circle of women are running around to develop the male character.

Stan: Men have set up traps of using women as foils and I really would feel very bad if women ended up in the same trap of using men as foils.

Bobbi: Every tenth discussion, it comes up—the women say, “Oh, look how awful they depicted the men.” I always get angry when anyone else says it, but I don’t mind saying it. It’s the whole tradition . . . major playwrights in the U.S. are men, and Albee’s, O’Neill’s, and Tennessee Williams’ depictions of women are not really of women, I feel they’re of men.

Winky: The whole thing about “We don’t want to be like men,” this fear . . . I think that women have some problems that are typically problems for women, but I don’t think that if they start asserting themselves that they will then become men. I’m not afraid that by doing a few things that point out problems that women have and creating situations that point out these problems, that they’ll go head over heels and use that as their only style. I think that’s a funny way of looking at it—like saying that if you’ve never been angry and you get angry, the next thing you’ll want to do is kill people or go to war.

Holly: I think there are a lot of good things going on in women’s liberation in particular and in the counterculture in general that will prevent that from happening. I don’t want to be a man; I don’t even particularly want to be like most of the men that I know, but I would like to have enough of the privileges so that I could be more of a person.

Linda: It’s unfortunate that those things are considered privileges.

After having done this play for four years, what kind of relation does it have to the kinds of work you’re doing now and in the future? I’ve heard in your current play you have a man playing a woman’s role and a woman playing a man’s role. Did that come out of your experience with *How to Make a Woman*?

Joe: Well, I think it could never have happened without *How to Make a Woman* and without women’s liberation. It was very difficult for us to do; we had a lot of discussion about it. But the basic thing is that we did it and I think it was an important thing for us to do.

Aili: The reason we chose to do it wasn’t directly having to do with sex roles—it was out of our own needs of the theatre, our own needs of the script, and sex roles weren’t an issue. It was because it was allowed *not* to be an issue. It was unimportant to choose roles primarily due to sex roles; there were other things we had to respond to first.

Joe: And we couldn’t have done *that* without having gone through *How to Make a Woman*, to be able to get to the stage where it didn’t count.

Holly: Just to get back to neutral.

Linda: Like the Red Queen running in *Through the Looking Glass*; you’ve got to run to stay in one spot.

Bobbi: There was an innkeeper who I think normally would have been a man, but we had no trouble in making it into a woman. The merchant is what I think Joe was talking about, where having had this experience thinking about sex roles, we were able to say it doesn’t matter, we’ll just play it for the needs of the theatre, but it was a harder

role for people to decide if it should be a man or a woman.

Peter: We would have had more problems if we had cast Barbara as the judge—it would have been more controversial among all of us to have a woman as both a merchant and a judge. The innkeeper didn’t seem to matter that much. That other switch would have been quite a struggle.

Linda: Earlier in the discussion you mentioned the limitations of *How to Make a Woman*. Could you talk about that?

Winky: It doesn’t ever talk about women coming together as a group and doing anything positive or joyous on their own. That’s what I want to do next—there are very few plays that way and I think it’s time that we do it. It would be a wonderful thing to write about . . . The thing I’ve always felt about *How to Make a Woman* is that it’s a growing piece and I’ve seen some changes: I was going through an old script in which Aili is talking about this Blueberry Man she meets who does all these wonderful adventurous things. In the old script she said “I would like to be *like* the Blueberry Man,” but it was changed so that she wanted to be a *Blueberry Woman*. So I see that it changes as we come to even greater awareness, and I would hope as a theatre group we would continue to create new pieces that dealt with that, either new relationships between women and women or changes in relationships between women and men. ♀



photo: Skip Schiel

Mary is seduced by the Wolf