

Sidling up to the empty

I had to tell the actor playing Francis that there are times, when faced with a plague as hopeless as this, we must manufacture hope

BY MICHAEL S. REED

Somewhere back here
March 14, 1988

Dear Suzanne:

You'll be pleased to know that *seven sundays* has now been produced three times; the latest production is presently running in Los Angeles. It was directed by Lisa Mount and has gone very well. You would have been proud of the job she did. We dedicated the show to you. I gave her a photo of you on opening night, and



she was very touched. We both feel your absence immensely and miss your courage and wisdom.

Critics! How trying they can be. Of course, I love them when they think I'm wonderful and despise them when they don't. The *Los Angeles Times* managed to misspell my name — a difficult thing to do — and said that, although the situation in the play was "trite," it was "socially redeeming" — whatever that implies — and "realistic." "It's easy to see how the specter of AIDS could create an impulse for human contact that would overlook lesser matters," the review said.

It's reassuring that the *Times* has such a splendid grip on the obvious. The review went on to say, however, that my dialogue is engaging.

The *Los Angeles Weekly* loved the play. The reviewer, Tom Provenzano, called it "breath-taking and heartbreaking," and said that it "quietly presents human truth, beauty and tragedy" and that it was "structured simply, delicately, naturalistically and very personally." He said it was a lovely play.

Richard Labonte of *The News* said it "is a rare play: it rings true, feels real, is honest with itself and with its audience." He also said my words were "eloquent and sure."

Sandra Kreiswirth of *The Entertainer* said that my writing "doesn't hit you over the head with how horrible the situation really is. The power of this piece comes from the individual and collective realizations from these men about themselves and each other. It makes the situation doubly sad and frustrating." She said that *seven sundays* "has a uniquely gentle touch that stays with you."

And Dale Reynolds, a reviewer for *Frontiers*, the L.A. gay newspaper, really liked the play but thought I should work on the opening and closing monologues by Francis, which are "still too self-consciously 'arty.'" He said that "AIDS is a tragedy that the gay community must be willing to continually confront. It is our reality and this kind of art makes it slightly more understandable and less mysterious."

I was happy, all in all, with the whole experience. The actors were quite good, Lisa Mount

did an excellent job, the set was realistic, and the producers were efficient, gracious and vital additions. The latter, according to some folks, is a rarity down there.

As for the reviews, well, who wouldn't be pleased? Five out of the six that I've received so far have been positively glowing. The producers have asked to extend the run for another four weeks. The cards and letters keep coming. So, I think we achieved what we began four years ago during our year together.

You taught me so much, first in your office and classroom, then later that year in your hospital room. You concerned yourself with the people around you and not your own pain, even though the pain must have been great. If I had not known you, I do not know how I would find the courage that these days require.

Do you remember the first words you said after reading *seven sundays*? You said, "You're a very sensitive man." I often wonder now if you said that because you knew I had written the play for you. Each moment spent with you made me a richer and deeper man. Because of you, I found words inside me beautiful enough to give back to the world.

So much to create, ascend or cascade, arrive or depart. All my plays about departure that I wrote while learning from you. Then loss. Gathering the pieces together. Move it (the picture) along.

Then August 1985 and this dream: A highway. We are driving along in the autumn rain. You say, "You'll be OK. It will be fine, all will be fine." Then somehow, we are beside an open grave. It rains more, and I watch the rectangular hole puddle with water. I am very alone. You say again, "All will be fine."

Then the telephone rings. They tell me you are dead.

Memories and hope. Hope is so damned important. I had to tell the actor playing Francis that there are times, when faced with a plague as hopeless as this, we must manufacture hope. To find hope when there seems to be none and give it to others is what we had intended for this play. When I last saw you, you were hoping to go home. A towel was wrapped around your head like a turban, and you told me tales of how you once sang opera. I suppose you knew that you wouldn't ever go home, but you convinced me. I believed it. We all did.

Now there is this thing I do, this thing we've done, this play called *seven sundays*, a temple where they may come to see, to hear, to feel. They cry at the story. The words reach them. And on opening night, I felt nothing except bewilderment. Too many ironies, I suppose. The irony of finding the most efficient way to create lesions that were the right color, size and texture. Would they fall off the actor? Was the music right? So much green. All this love. You would have liked it, for sometimes it sang with the angels.

Death, no matter what, becomes cheap sentiment. Someone dies. Over. Turn the page, next chapter. One long book. One word: Why?

Because without it, no one would be here to see the rain, the winos, the lights, the drama, the ocean, the days. Without it, my fearless editor's happy excision of my precious commas seems almost trivial. And even though some days pass long and aching, I wouldn't give up a minute.

All my love,
Michael

Editor's note: Dr. Suzanne Bales taught theater at Lewis and Clark College during the year 1984-85. She died of cancer in August 1985. •

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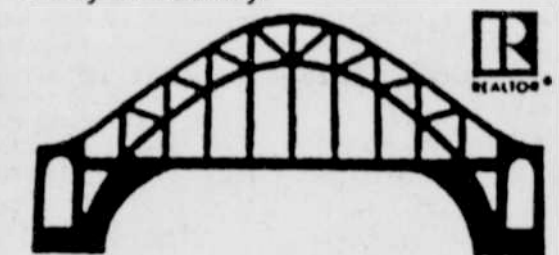
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