

The Prompt Book

A Tale of Structural Dread

Michael S. Moniz, after H.P. Lovecraft

LV06

I have managed stages for nineteen years, and in that time I have learned one thing that no director, no actor, and no playwright has ever willingly accepted: the theater is a machine. It has moving parts. It has tolerances. It has a maintenance schedule and a failure mode, and when it fails it fails because someone neglected the machine, not because the art was insufficient or the muse was absent. The muse has nothing to do with it. A show goes up because the cues are called, the flies are rigged, the deck is spiked, and the prompt book is current. A show comes down because the inverse is true. I have never encountered an exception to this principle, and I say so now because what follows will appear to be an exception, and I want it understood from the first line that I do not accept it as one. Something happened in the Kingsport Theatre on MacDougal Street during the November run of 1925. I was present. I documented it in the way I document every production — with cue sheets and blocking charts and a prompt book that recorded every deviation from the rehearsed performance. The documentation is thorough. The documentation is, as of this writing, blank. I will explain that presently.

My name is Ruth Alderman. I am a stage manager. I have worked the Colonial in Boston, the Bandbox on East 57th, the Wharf Theatre in Provincetown before the company moved to the Village, and fourteen other houses of varying

size and reputation across New England and New York. I am not an artist. I have never wished to be. I am the person who ensures that art occurs on schedule and within the mechanical parameters of the building that houses it. I call the cues. I keep the book. I time the blackouts to the half-second, because a blackout that runs long is not atmosphere — it is a failure of the lamp operator to execute the board cue I have written in my prompt book in pencil, in block letters, with the line that triggers it underlined twice. I am precise because the stage requires precision, and because precision is the only inoculation I have found against the chronic imprecision of actors, directors, and the theater in general.

I say this not out of vanity. I say it because it may be the reason I survived.

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Anton Czerny arrived at the Kingsport in September with a manuscript under his arm and the particular intensity of a man who has found something he does not entirely understand and has decided to stage it rather than study it. I had worked with Czerny once before — a production of Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight* that he directed with more vision than budget and that I managed into a tolerably professional shape despite a fly system that jammed on the third performance and an actor in the Cashier role who could not be relied upon to enter from the correct wing on consecutive nights. Czerny was brilliant and impractical in equal measure. He thought in images. I thought in cue sheets. We were, against all reason, an effective partnership, and the reason we were effective was that he was one of the only directors I had encountered in nineteen years who understood that my work was not subordinate to

his. He did not treat the prompt book as clerical support for the artistic vision. He treated it as the other half of the production — the mechanical half, the half that ensured his images actually materialised in front of an audience rather than dissipating in the space between his imagination and the stage. I respected him for this. It is possible that this respect is the reason I did not shut down the production when I should have.

He sat in the house seats while I inventoried the lamp stock and told me about the play. He had acquired a manuscript — handwritten, in French, no author credited — from the estate of a collector in Paris who had died the previous spring. The circumstances of the collector's death were, he said, not relevant. I did not press. In nineteen years of theater I have learned that the provenance of scripts is frequently irregular and that asking too many questions about where a director found his material is as fruitless as asking a stagehand where he found his cigarettes.

The play was called *The King in Yellow*. Both acts. Complete.

I had heard the title. Most people in the literary theater had heard it, the way one hears of a manuscript that is supposed to be extraordinary and dangerous and that no one has actually read — the way one heard of the *Necronomicon* in certain academic circles, as a rumour that persisted because no one could conclusively dispel it. There were fragments attributed to it — a few lines of dialogue, a scene description, the names Cassilda and Camilla and the Stranger, a reference to Carcosa that meant nothing to me and that Czerny pronounced with a care that suggested it meant a great deal to him.

He read me a passage from Act I. The language was formal, strange, and very good. A woman in a mask speaking to a figure she could not identify: You, sir, should unmask. — Indeed? — Indeed, it is time. We have all laid aside disguise but you. — I wear no mask. — No mask? No mask! The repetition at the end had a quality I could not place — not theatrical surprise, but something closer to recognition. The woman was not shocked. She was confirming something she had always known and had been waiting, with a patience that the text made architectural, to hear said aloud.

“Act I is very fine,” Czerny said. “It is better than anything I have staged. Better than anything I have read. It establishes the dynasty, the city, the masked stranger, and the question of identity with a precision that makes every other play I know look like it is wasting the audience’s time.” He paused. “Act II is different.”

“Different how?”

He did not answer immediately. He looked at the manuscript in his lap — loose pages, covered in a small, regular hand, the ink brown with age — and I saw something in his face that I had not seen before in Anton Czerny. Not confusion. Not excitement. A kind of uncertainty that belonged to a man who had read something he could not subsequently hold in his memory in the way that one holds a text. He could tell me the shape. He could not, with any consistency, tell me the content.

“It is the second act,” he said finally. “The play tells you everything it intends to do in the first act, and then the second act does it.”

I asked him what, specifically, it did. He opened his mouth. He closed it. He looked at the manuscript again. “I would prefer that you read it yourself,” he said.

I told him that I did not read plays. I managed them. I would read it for cues, for blocking, for entrances and exits and furniture calls. I would not read it for content, because content was his problem and mechanics were mine. He seemed, I thought, relieved.

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We cast four actors and began rehearsals in the first week of October. Act I went cleanly. The language was unusual — formal, cadenced, built on repetitions that accumulated meaning the way a tide accumulates against a seawall — but it was playable. The actors found their rhythms. I marked my prompt book: blocking, cue points, light changes, the single sound cue that Act I required, which was a sustained low tone during the Stranger’s first entrance that Czerny wanted produced on a cello played offstage left. I recorded everything in pencil, in my hand, in the margins of my copy of the script, which I had transcribed from Czerny’s French into functional English stage directions, ignoring the literary content and extracting only the mechanical instructions that the text contained.

I want to be clear about this. I did not read the play. I processed it. I converted its stage directions into cue notations. I noted its entrances, its exits, its crosses, its furniture requirements. I did not read the dialogue except to identify the lines on which cues fell. I did not absorb the content of the speeches because the content was not my responsibility and because, in nineteen years, I had found that absorbing content made me a worse stage manager, not a better one. Content created expectations. Expectations

created anticipation. Anticipation created timing errors. I did not anticipate. I executed. The prompt book was my instrument, and it operated on the play's mechanics, not on its meaning.

This distinction will matter.

Act II rehearsals began in the third week of October, and the problems were immediate.

They were not dramatic problems. They were not supernatural problems. They were, at first, the kind of problems I had spent nineteen years managing: an actor crosses upstage when the blocking calls for downstage. A line reading shifts between Tuesday's rehearsal and Thursday's. The furniture is in a different position than the spike marks indicate, and no one can account for the discrepancy. These are the ordinary failures of the ordinary stage, and I noted them in my prompt book with the mechanical irritation that is my professional register and corrected them and moved on.

But the corrections did not hold. And on the afternoon of October 23rd, during the fourth rehearsal of Act II, the corrections stopped being the kind I knew how to make.

Margaret Everly was running Cassilda's speech in the second scene — the passage where Cassilda addresses the court about the dynasty's obligation to the city. I was following in my prompt book, finger on the line, pencil in hand, ready to mark a light cue that fell on her cross to the window. She reached the cross. She did not stop at the window. She continued past it, upstage, toward the Carcosa flat, and delivered a passage that was not in my script.

I called “hold.” The rehearsal stopped. Margaret turned to me with an expression that was not defiance but genuine confusion.

“The line, Margaret. You’re off book.”

“I’m reading the text, Ruth.”

I stood up from my table and walked onto the deck and crossed to where she stood, and I held my prompt book open to the page and pointed to the line where she had deviated. “This is where you are. This is the speech. The cross is to the window, not upstage. The line is ‘The dynasty’s hour is not determined by the clock.’ You said something else.”

Margaret looked at my page. Then she held out her own script, open to the same scene. I looked at it.

The passage she had spoken was there. In the same typeface, on the same page, in the same position as the line in my copy — but it was not the same line. Hers was longer. It continued past the sentence I had recorded and into a passage that mine did not contain, and the passage described — I caught this in the mechanical glance of a stage manager checking text, not reading it — a continuation of Cassilda’s address that extended the speech by eight or nine lines and moved the cross from the window to the upstage flat, exactly as Margaret had performed it.

I looked at my copy. I looked at hers. The cue notation I had written in my margin — “LQ 7 GO on ‘clock’” — was in my handwriting, in my pencil, on a line that now appeared, in her script, to fall in the middle of a speech rather than at its end.

“Margaret, this passage was not here yesterday.”

She looked at me. “Ruth, it’s been there since Czerny gave me the script.”

I stood on the stage under the work lights and I held both books open and I could not explain the discrepancy. The pages were not altered. They were not pasted over, not retyped, not physically modified in any way I could detect. The paper was the same. The typeface was the same. The line spacing was the same. The text was simply different, and my copy was the one that appeared incomplete, and my own cue notation — in my hand, in my pencil, dated in my format — now corresponded to a position in the speech that made no mechanical sense unless the longer version had been the text all along.

I recopied the page that night from Czerny’s master manuscript, checking word by word, and pasted the new page into my prompt book. By the next rehearsal, the new page matched Margaret’s delivery. But the page I had removed — the original, which I had kept in a folder as a record — now also matched. My pencil notes on the removed page corresponded to cues that fell on lines that had not existed when I made the notes. My own handwriting had become unreliable. Not because my hand had changed, but because the text beneath the hand had moved.

The play was editing my prompt book through my own hand.

I went to Czerny. I told him that the script was not stable. He nodded as though I had confirmed something he already knew and said: “The play knows how it wants to be staged. Our job is to stop preventing it.”

I did not find this reassuring. I told him so. He smiled and said that the best productions were the ones where the stage manager’s book and the performance converged, and

that this convergence was happening faster than he had expected, and that I should trust it. I told him that I did not trust convergences that I had not engineered. He said that my engineering was excellent and that the play appreciated it. He used the word “appreciated” as though the text were a system capable of registering approval. I wrote this exchange in my personal notebook, which was separate from the prompt book, and I underlined the word “appreciated.”

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There was a night in the first week of November, ten days before opening, when I nearly shut it down.

It was past eleven. The actors had gone. The crew had locked the shop and left. Czerny and I were alone in the theater — he in the third row of the house with the manuscript open on his lap, I at my stage manager’s desk in the wings with two cups of coffee from the diner on the corner going cold between us. The work lights were on, casting the flat yellow illumination that makes every theater look like what it is when the audience is absent: a room full of equipment.

I had been reconciling my prompt book against the day’s rehearsal, and the reconciliation was not going well. Three more cues had appeared in my margins that I could not account for. A blocking change in the Stranger’s entrance had migrated from Czerny’s direction to my notation without passing through the intermediate step of me actually writing it down. My book was more complete than it had been that morning, and the completions were in my hand, and I had no memory of making them.

“Anton,” I said. “I need to tell you something and I need you to hear it as a professional observation, not as a complaint.”

He looked up from the manuscript. In the work-light his face was drawn and intent and older than his forty-one years.

“This production is the best work I have ever managed. The actors are performing beyond anything I have seen in nineteen years. The blocking is precise. The cues are clean. Act I is extraordinary. And I cannot account for any of it, because my own documentation is changing underneath me and I do not understand the mechanism.”

He was quiet for a moment. Then he said: “You have not read the play, Ruth.”

“No.”

“If you read it — if you read it for content, I mean, not for your cues — you would understand what is happening.”

“That is not my job.”

“No,” he agreed. “It is not. And I think —” He stopped. He looked at the manuscript in his lap and I saw him try to organise a thought that would not hold its shape. It was the expression of a man reaching for a sentence in a dream and finding that the words rearrange themselves as his hand closes. “The play does something, Ruth. It builds something in the first act. A structure. An architecture. And the architecture is not metaphorical. When I say the play builds something, I mean that the text, in the act of being read, constructs —” He stopped again. “I cannot say what it constructs. I know what it constructs when I am reading it and I cannot hold the knowledge when I am not reading it. It is like trying to describe a room you are no longer standing

in, except that the room changes when you leave it, so that your description is accurate and also wrong.”

“Anton. Should I be concerned about what happens when we put this in front of an audience?”

He looked at me. His eyes were clear. He was not confused and he was not evasive and he was not, I thought, deceived. He knew what the play did. He simply could not say it in a sentence that survived the saying.

“The audience will see the play,” he said. “The play will do what it does. I have read it. The actors have read it. You have not read it. Of the three, I believe your position is the safest, and I believe that is not an accident.”

I should have stopped the production that night. I had cause. I had nineteen years of professional judgment telling me that a script that edited itself and a director who could not describe his own material were grounds for shutting down and walking away. But the production was extraordinary — genuinely, undeniably extraordinary — and the part of me that was a stage manager, which is to say all of me, could not bring herself to shut down a machine that was operating beyond its own specifications. The machine was running. It was running better than any machine I had ever managed. And Czerny had told me, in the only way he could, that my ignorance of the content was a form of protection. I did not understand what he meant. I stayed anyway. I stayed because the machine was beautiful, and because Czerny was the one director who had ever treated my machinery as equal to his art, and because shutting down a production ten days before opening requires a certainty I did not have.

I had the wrong certainty. I was certain about the mechanics. The mechanics were perfect. I did not understand that the mechanics were perfect because the play had made them perfect, and that the play's interest in my mechanics was not collaborative but instrumental. The play needed a stage manager. It needed the cues called and the flies rigged and the board operated. It needed the machine to run. It did not need the machine's operator to understand what the machine was for.

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Opening night was November 14th, 1925. A Friday. The house seated ninety-six. It was full. The Village literary audience, supplemented by a few academics from Columbia who had heard rumours of the manuscript's provenance, and a drama critic from the Herald Tribune whose name I have forgotten and who did not, in the event, file a review. The lobby was warm, the programs were printed, the house manager reported all seats occupied. A normal opening. The smell of perfume and wool and the particular collective warmth that an audience generates in a small theater in November.

Act I was flawless.

I called every cue. The lights executed. The cello played its low tone on the Stranger's entrance and the audience shifted in their seats the way an audience does when something real is happening on stage — not the performative attention of theatergoers being dutiful, but the involuntary lean of people who have forgotten that they are watching a performance. Margaret was extraordinary. The Stranger was extraordinary. The court scenes built with a precision that I could feel in the cues — each transition landing at the exact half-second I had plotted, each blackout

holding for exactly the count I had written, the machine operating at a tolerance I had never achieved in any previous production. Act I ended on the Stranger's line about the Pallid Mask, and the curtain came down, and the applause was immediate and sustained, and I thought: this is the best first act I have ever managed.

Intermission. Fifteen minutes. I checked the board.

There were cues on the board that I had not programmed.

I am meticulous about my light plots. Every cue has a number, a count, a source notation, a gel reference, and a line trigger. These are written in my prompt book and transferred to the board operator's cue sheet in my handwriting. The cue sheet for Act II had six cues that I had written and four that I had not. The four additional cues were in my handwriting. They referenced instruments that existed in the grid — I checked — and gels that were loaded — I checked that too — and they fell on line triggers that I located in my prompt book and found underlined, in my pencil, in my hand, on lines that I was not certain had been in the script when I made my original notations. The cues were competent. They were, in fact, exactly the cues I would have written if I had been plotting the lighting for the scenes they accompanied. They were my work. I simply did not remember doing them.

I went to the fly gallery. The Carcosa flat — a painted backdrop depicting a skyline of spires and a lake that Czerny had commissioned from a scenic artist in Brooklyn — had moved. It was rigged correctly; the lines were clean, the clew was balanced. But it was on a different batten than I had assigned. I checked my fly chart. The chart showed the flat on the batten where it now hung. The chart was in my handwriting. I could not remember writing it.

I found the crew in the greenroom. I asked who had moved the Carcosa flat. They looked at me as though I had asked who had moved the building. No one had moved the flat. The flat was where it had always been. My own records confirmed it. I was the only person in the building who perceived a discrepancy, and I could not demonstrate it, because every document that would have proved the discrepancy now agreed with the current state of the stage.

I went to the wings. Stage left, my position. The actors were in places. They were still. Not the stillness of actors waiting for a curtain — the focused, nervous, slightly electric stillness of people about to perform — but a different quality. A receptive stillness. They were waiting, but not for my cue. They were waiting for something on the other side of the curtain to be ready for them. Margaret Everly stood at her entrance position with her eyes open and her breathing even and her hands at her sides, and she looked not like a woman about to perform Cassilda but like a woman who had been Cassilda for a very long time and was about to stop pretending otherwise.

I called “places.” It was unnecessary. Everyone was already in position. But I called it because the call is the protocol and the protocol is the machine and the machine was the only thing I had left that I understood.

I called “go.” The curtain rose on Act II.

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The performance began and for two pages I followed in my prompt book and the lines matched and the blocking matched and the cues fell on their marks and I thought: it is a play. It is only a play. Whatever has been happening in rehearsals, whatever the script has been doing to itself, the

performance is the performance and I am managing it and the machine is running.

Then it was not.

Margaret spoke a line that was in my book — I checked, I checked immediately, my finger on the page — and the line was: The city is not behind the stars. The city is what the stars are behind. The words were simple. The words were syntactically coherent. The words did something to the room. I felt it in the way you feel a change in air pressure before a storm — not heard, not seen, but registered in the inner ear, in the architecture of the skull, in the part of the body that knows when the atmosphere has shifted before the mind has catalogued the shift.

The audience did not react. The audience had stopped reacting. I looked at the house. Ninety-six people in ninety-six seats. Not restless, not rapt — still. Still in a way that audiences are never still. No coughs. No programs rustling. No seats creaking. No small adjustments of posture. Ninety-six people breathing in unison, which is a thing that audiences do not do. Audiences are collections of individuals. This was no longer a collection. It had become something aggregate — a single organ of attention, oriented toward the stage with a uniformity that was not fascination but submission.

I looked at the stage. The blocking was wrong. Not wrong the way blocking goes wrong in a live performance — an actor upstage of their mark, a cross taken early. The blocking was wrong because the actors were moving to positions that were correct for a space that was not the stage I had built. They were hitting marks that did not correspond to my spike tape. They were orienting themselves to walls that were not the walls of the set, to

distances that were not the distances between the flats, to a geography that I had not plotted because it was not a geography that existed inside the Kingsport Theatre.

The back wall of the stage was wrong. The back wall of the Kingsport is exposed brick, eighteen feet from the proscenium. I know this because I measured it during load-in, as I measure every stage I work, because the dimensions of the playing space are the first entry in every prompt book I have ever kept. Eighteen feet. I had walked it, measured it with a steel tape, entered it in ink on the first page of my book. The back wall was not eighteen feet from the proscenium. It was farther. I tried to gauge the distance — twenty feet, twenty-five, thirty — and I could not, because the unit of measurement had changed. The wall was not receding. The space was not expanding in the way that a room expands. The stage had been replaced by a place that was larger than the building that contained it, and the replacement was so total that looking for the back wall was like looking for a shore from the middle of an ocean. The reference point was not distant. It was absent.

The lighting changed. I checked the board. Every channel was at zero. The dimmers were dead. The light on stage was not coming from my instruments. It was not coming from the grid, or the wings, or any source I could identify. It was coming from the place that had replaced the stage — an illumination without source, without shadow, without the directionality that every light I have ever hung possesses. It rendered everything with a clarity that was worse than darkness, because darkness conceals and this light disclosed. I could see the weave of Margaret's costume. I could see the grain of the stage floor where the stage floor still existed. I could see, in the air above the actors, a faint particulate suspension, like dust in a shaft of sunlight,

except that the particles were not falling. They were organising. Assembling. Aligning into a structure that I could almost perceive and then could not, the way a word on the tip of the tongue dissolves the moment you reach for it.

And on the stage, the Stranger spoke, and his voice was not the actor's voice, and the words were in my prompt book, and the words were: Remove the mask. There is no mask. There has never been a mask. What you believed was a mask is the face of the place you are going, and you have been wearing it since you first read these words.

The audience was silent. I looked through the proscenium at the house. Ninety-six people, eyes open, faces turned toward the stage, and none of them were moving. Not frozen — I want to be precise about the distinction. They were not paralysed. They were received. They had been accepted by whatever the stage had become, and they were no longer in the theater in the way that a letter is no longer in the mailbox once it has been collected. They were present. They were not here. They had been taken to the place the play was showing them, and they had gone willingly, because the play had done its work in Act I — had built the architecture of Cassilda's world so carefully and so persuasively that when Act II opened the door into that world, the audience walked through it the way you walk through any door that has been opened by someone you trust.

On the stage, Cassilda spoke. My finger was on the line. The line read: I have seen the sign. It is not a symbol. It is an address. And you have already arrived. And the actress who spoke the line was not performing. Her voice was not projected. It was not placed. It was the voice of a woman speaking in a room that was no longer a theater, to an

assembly that was no longer an audience, in a city that was no longer New York.

I was in the wings. I was holding my prompt book. I was standing in the mechanical space — the space of ropes and counterweights and gaffer tape and glow-taped spike marks on the floor. The backstage. The space that is not the fiction. I stood in the space that is not the fiction, and I watched through the proscenium arch, and what I saw through the proscenium arch was not the stage I had built.

I could not describe what I saw. Not because it was beyond language, beyond comprehension — not the vocabulary of overwhelm. I could not describe it because I had never read the text for meaning. I had read it for cues. I had the mechanical framework — the blocking, the light cues, the sound cues, the entrance and exit notations — but I did not have the content. The play had built an architecture in the minds of everyone who had read it for meaning — the actors, the director, the audience who had received Act I as a narrative rather than a sequence of cues — and Act II was activating that architecture, opening it, making it habitable. But my mind contained no such architecture. I had processed the play as machinery. The play could not reach me because I had never opened the door that the play operated through, which was the door of reading it as a reader. Of allowing its language to construct the interior scaffolding that its second act required in order to function.

The machinery saved me. My refusal to read for meaning. My insistence on cues, on blocking, on the mechanical reduction of art to engineering. Nineteen years of professional discipline had made me immune to the play's instrument, because the play's instrument was meaning,

and I had spent my entire career refusing to engage with meaning in favour of mechanics.

I stood in the wings and I watched and I could not be taken because I had never been addressed.

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The play ended. I did not call the curtain. The curtain was meaningless — there was no stage for it to conceal, no proscenium for it to frame. The play ended because it decided to end. It finished its work. The machine completed its cycle.

The lights came up. The house lights, the real ones, from my board. The board was live again — every channel restored to its preset, every cue re-queued as though the dead interval during Act II had not occurred. The stage was a stage. Eighteen feet to the back wall. The exposed brick, the spike marks, the Carcosa flat hanging on its batten. The mechanical space had reasserted itself with the quiet authority of a building that has been a building for longer than it was briefly something else.

The house was empty.

Ninety-six seats. No coats on the seat-backs. No programs on the floor. No gloves dropped between the chairs, no ticket stubs, no evidence that an audience had occupied those seats twenty minutes earlier. The seats were in their upright position, as though the house had been struck and reset by a crew that cleaned as it worked. The air was still and cold and smelled of nothing — not of perfume, not of wool, not of the particular collective warmth that ninety-six bodies deposit in a small theater over the course of a

performance. The room smelled as though no one had been in it for a very long time.

The actors were on stage. All four of them, standing in a loose arrangement that was not the final tableau of the play as I had it blocked. They were upright. Their eyes were open. I crossed from the wings onto the deck and stood in front of Margaret Everly and said her name. She did not respond. Her eyes did not track my movement. I put my hand on her shoulder and said her name again. Her costume was warm beneath my palm. Her skin, when I touched her wrist to check her pulse, was warm. The pulse was steady and normal — sixty, sixty-two beats per minute, the resting heart rate of a healthy woman in her early thirties. She was breathing. She was blinking, at long intervals, the slow automatic blink of a body maintaining itself in the absence of the person who usually inhabited it. Her eyes were open and her eyes were focused, but they were not focused on me or on the stage or on anything in the Kingsport Theatre. They were focused on something at a distance that the theater did not contain.

I checked the other three actors. The same. Breathing, warm, pulse normal, eyes open, nobody home. Their bodies were present and maintained and their occupants had departed, and the departure was so complete and so clean that what remained was not distress or vacancy but a kind of settled absence, the way a house feels when the family has moved out and the rooms are empty but not yet unfamiliar.

Anton Czerny was in the front row. The only person remaining in the house. He sat with his hands on the armrests and his head tilted slightly back and his eyes open. I walked down the deck steps and crossed to his seat and

stood over him and I saw on his face an expression I recognised — not from the theater, but from my years of watching audiences at the moment when a production delivers on its promise. It was satisfaction. It was the expression of a man who has seen the thing he came to see, who has received exactly what the performance offered, whose fulfilment was so complete that it had passed through pleasure into something calmer and more final. He had staged the second act of *The King in Yellow*, and the second act had done what second acts do, which is to deliver on the promises of the first. The delivery was total. He was satisfied.

He did not respond when I said his name. He did not respond when I shook his shoulder. His pulse was sixty-eight. His skin was warm. He was breathing. He was not here.

I looked down at my prompt book.

Every page was blank.

Not erased. Not overwritten. The pages were clean — clean in the way that new paper is clean, as though nothing had ever been written on them. No pencil marks. No cue notations. No blocking charts. No pasted-in corrections, no stage directions, no lighting plots, no fly cues, no sound cues, no spike-mark diagrams. The prompt book that I had maintained across six weeks of rehearsal, that contained every mechanical detail of the production in my hand in my pencil in my format, was empty. The play had taken itself back. It had collected not only its audience and its actors and its director but its own operational record, the mechanical scaffolding of its own staging, as though it did not intend to leave evidence that it had been performed. As though performance, for this play, was not an event to be

documented but a function to be executed and then withdrawn.

I closed the prompt book. I set it on the stage manager's desk in the wings, beside the dead intercom and the gooseneck lamp that was still warm. I put on my coat. I turned off the work lights. I walked through the house, past Anton Czerny in his seat, past the ninety-five empty chairs, up the aisle and through the lobby and out the front door onto MacDougal Street.

It was November. It was cold. A vendor on the corner of Bleecker was packing up his chestnut cart, and the smell of the charcoal was sharp and ordinary in the night air. A taxi moved south on Sixth Avenue, its headlamps swinging across the facade of the building opposite. Two women in fur collars walked north on MacDougal, laughing at something one of them had said, their breath visible in the streetlight. The city was intact. The world was intact. MacDougal Street did not know that anything had happened in the small theater halfway down its block, because nothing had happened that MacDougal Street was equipped to register.

I stood on the sidewalk and I did not scream. I did not collapse. I am not the collapsing type, and screaming is not a productive use of a stage manager's time. I stood on the sidewalk and I understood what had happened, and what had happened was very simple.

The play worked.

Not metaphorically. Not in the critical sense — not “the play worked” meaning the drama was effective, the performances were compelling, the audience was moved. The play worked in the mechanical sense. The play was a

machine, as all plays are machines, and this machine's function was not to represent a place for an audience but to take an audience to a place. Act I built the architecture. Act II opened the door. The audience walked through. The actors walked through. The director, who had read the text and understood it and staged it with the full knowledge of what he was staging, walked through last and with the most complete satisfaction.

I did not walk through. I am a stage manager. I operate the machinery of the theater from the wings. I do not enter the fiction. I have never, in nineteen years, entered the fiction. That is not my role. My role is to ensure that the fiction operates on schedule and within the mechanical parameters of the building. And when the fiction exceeded those parameters — when the building could no longer contain what the play was doing, when the stage became a place and the audience became travellers — I remained in the wings, because the wings are where the stage manager stands, and the wings are the one place in the theater where the fiction has no authority.

The next morning I returned to the Kingsport with two patrolmen from the Charles Street station. We found the actors on the stage and Czerny in the house, exactly as I had left them. They were breathing. They were warm. A physician from St. Vincent's examined them and pronounced them alive and uninjured and unresponsive to any stimulus he could produce. They were transferred to Bellevue. As of the date of this account, none of them have spoken. They breathe. They blink. They accept water and broth. Their eyes are open and their eyes see nothing in this room or any room I have observed them in. They are elsewhere. I believe they are where the play took them, and I believe the play has no return journey, because the play was never designed

for a return journey. It was designed to deliver its audience, and it delivered them, and the delivery was permanent.

I am writing this account in a notebook that is not my prompt book. The prompt book is in the bottom drawer of my desk in the apartment I keep on Barrow Street, and it is blank, and I will not discard it, and I will not write in it again. It is the only documentation that remains, and the blankness is the only thing it documents, and the blankness says everything that needs to be said, which is: the play was here. The play worked. The play is gone. I do not know where the play took them. I never read it for content. I could not follow them if I wanted to, and I do not want to, and even that is not the precise truth — the precise truth is that wanting has nothing to do with it. I was never eligible. The play was a door, and I spent my entire career building the frame of the door and oiling the hinges of the door and checking that the door swung freely on its pivot, and I never once walked through it, because walking through doors is what audiences do. Stage managers build the door. They do not use it. The door is closed now. The theater on MacDougal Street is dark. The prompt book is blank. And somewhere past the proscenium, past the place where the back wall should have been and was not, past the limit of the stage I measured and the cues I plotted and the machinery I spent nineteen years learning to operate — somewhere I cannot reach and cannot name and was never equipped to see — the play continues. The second act has no curtain call. The second act has no intermission. The second act does not end, because the second act is not a performance. It is an arrival.

And I was never invited.

— END —