



GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

A CONSCIENTIOUS CALENDAR OF EVENTS OF INTEREST

THE THEATRE PLAYS AND MUSICALS

ANOTHER PHAEDRA VIA HERCULES—A theatrical work by Ellen Stewart. (La Mama Annex, 66 E. 4th St. 475-7710. Thursday through Sunday at 7:30. Closes Sunday, March 20.)

ANYTHING GOES—Under the clever direction of Jerry Zaks, this exuberant revival is primarily a celebration of Cole Porter himself. The libretto, as revised from the original by Timothy Crouse and John Weidman, is consistently entertaining. The company, which includes Bill McCutcheon, Howard McGillin, Patti LuPone, Anthony Heald, and Kathleen Mahony-Bennett, does more than justice to the words and score. (Reviewed in our issue of 11/2/87.) (Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center, 239-6200. Tuesdays through Saturdays at 8. Matinéés Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2, and Sundays at 3.)

BOYS' LIFE—A comedy by Howard Korder. (Mitzi E. Newhouse, Lincoln Center, 239-6200. Tuesdays through Saturdays at 8, and Sundays at 7:30. Matinéés Saturdays and Sundays at 2.)

THE BOYS NEXT DOOR—The "boys" are three retarded men and a schizophrenic who, under professional supervision, share an apartment. Tom Griffin's rood play, though inevitably touching, is also often very funny, and never sentimental. It is acted to near-perfection by a first-rate company, which includes Christine Estabrook, Josh Mostel, and William Jay. (2/22/88) (Lambs, 130 W. 44th St. 997-1780. Tuesdays through Saturdays at 8. Matinéés Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2, and Sundays at 3.)

BREAKING THE CODE—Derek Jacobi is accomplished and fascinating as the English mathematician Alan Turing, who helped crack the German Enigma code during the war, but Hugh Whitmore's script is more vehicle than play. Michael Gough, Rachel Gurney, and Jenny Agutter are among the good supporting actors. Clifford Williams was the director. (11/30/87) (Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 246-0102. Tuesdays through Saturdays at 8. Matinéés Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2, and Sundays at 3.)

BURN THIS—Lanford Wilson's play can be considered an occasion for an astonishing performance by John Malkovich, as a foul-mouthed restaurant manager who woos and wins his dead brother's dancing partner. The supporting actors—Joan Allen, Jonathan Hogan, and Lou Liberatore—are also good. Marshall W. Mason was the director, and the distinguished setting was designed by John Lee Beatty and lighted by Dennis Parichy. (10/26/87) (Plymouth, 236 W. 45th St. 239-6200. Nightly, except Sundays, at 8. Matinéés Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2.)

CABARET—This tasteful revival of the 1966 musical by John Kander and Fred Ebb (directed by Harold Prince) has a gloriously muted Joel Grey re-creating his role as the Emcee and a sterling performance by Alyson Reed, who plays Sally Bowles as she was always meant to be played. (11/2/87) (Minskoff, 45th St. west of Broadway. 869-0550. Tuesdays through Saturdays at 8. Matinéés Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2, and Sundays at 3.)

THE CHERRY ORCHARD—Even the fine performances of Erald Josephson as wistful, hapless Gaev and Zeljko Ivanek as scruffy, passionate Trofimov cannot shed light on Peter Brook's opaque production of Chekhov's masterpiece. (2/8/88) (Majestic, 651 Fulton St., about a block east of Flatbush Ave., Brooklyn. 1-718 636-4100. Tuesdays through Saturdays at 8, and Sundays at 7. Matinéés Saturdays at 3 and Sundays at 2.)

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EQUITY LIBRARY THEATRE—A revival of LEAVE IT TO ME, Cole Porter's 1938 musical, is the sixth in this season's series of eight productions. (Equity Library Theatre, 103rd St. and Riverside Dr. Nightly, except Mondays, at 8. Matinéés Saturdays and Sundays at 2:30. Closes Sunday, April 3. For information about tickets, for which contributions are requested, call 663-2028.)

FRANKIE AND JOHNNY IN THE CLAIR DE LUNE—Terrence McNally's enchanting comedy about sex and the sudden onset of love in an apartment on Tenth Avenue in the Fifties. Kathy Bates and Kenneth Welsh are remarkable, under the direction of Paul Benedict. (11/9/87) (Westside Arts, 407 W. 43rd St. 541-8394. Tuesdays through Saturdays at 8, and Sundays at 7. Matinéés Saturdays and Sundays at 3. Special performance for the Equity Fights AIDS Fund on Monday, March 14, at 8.)

THE GREAT HUNGER—A play by Tom MacIntyre. Presented by the Abbey Theatre of Ireland. Opens Tuesday, March 15, and will run through Sunday, March 27. (Triplex, 199 Chambers St. 618-1980. Tuesdays through Saturdays at 8; opening-night curtain at 7:30. Matinéés Saturdays at 2 and Sundays at 3.)

INTO THE WOODS—The new musical by Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine is an attempt to show what lurks beneath the surface of conventional fairy tales. The amusing first half is like a musical staging of Bruno Bettelheim's "The Uses of Enchantment." The rather nasty second half degenerates into cheap philosophy. The costumes (by Ann Hould-Ward) and sets (by Tony Straiges) are pretty to look at, and the songs are beautiful or funny—sometimes both. The superb cast, led by Bernadette Peters and Joanna Gleason, is directed by Mr. Lapine. (11/16/87) (Martin Beck, 302 W. 45th St. 246-6363. Tuesdays through Saturdays at 8. Matinéés Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2, and Sundays at 3.)

M. BUTTERFLY—John Lithgow and B. D. Wong in a new play by David Henry Hwang. Directed by John Dexter. Previews through Saturday, March 19. Opens officially on Sunday, March 20, at 6. (Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 246-0220. Tuesdays through Saturdays at

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SHOELACE

MY left shoelace snapped at the office just before lunch. At some earlier point in the morning, my left shoe had become untied, and as I sat at my desk working on a memo my foot sensed its potential freedom and slipped out of the sauna of black cordovan to soothe itself with rhythmic movements over an area of wall-to-wall carpeting under my desk, which, unlike the tamped-down areas of public traffic, was still almost as soft and fibrous as it had been when first installed. Only under the desks and in the little-used conference rooms was the pile still plush enough to hold the beautiful "M"s and "V"s the night crew left as strokes of their vacuum cleaners' wands made swaths of dustless tufting lean in directions that alternately absorbed and reflected the light. As I worked, my foot had, without any sanction from my conscious will, slipped from the untied shoe and sought out the texture of the carpeting, although now, as I reconstruct the moment, I realize that a more specialized desire was at work as well: when you slide a socked foot over a carpeted surface, the fibres of sock and carpet mesh and lock, so that though you think you are enjoying the texture of the carpeting, you are really enjoying the slippage of the inner surface of the sock against the underside of your foot, something you normally only get to experience in the morning when you first pull the sock on.¹

At a few minutes before twelve, I stopped working, removed and threw out my earplugs and, more carefully, the remainder of my morning coffee—placing it upright within the converging spinnakers of the trash-can liner on the base of the receptacle itself. I stapled a copy of a memo someone had cc'd me on to a copy of an earlier memo I had written on the same subject and wrote at the top to my manager, in my best casual scrawl, "Abe—

¹When I pull a sock on, I no longer *pre-bunch*; that is, I don't gather the sock up into telescoped folds over my thumbs and then position the resultant doughnut over my toes, even though I believed for some years that this was a clever trick, taught by admirable, fresh-faced kindergarten teachers, and that I revealed my laziness and my inability to plan ahead by instead holding the sock by the ankle rim and jamming my foot to its destination, working the ankle a few times to properly seat the heel. Why? The more elegant pre-bunching can leave in place any pieces of grit that have embedded themselves in your sole from the imperfectly swept floor you walked on to get from the shower to your room, while the cruder, more direct method, though it risks tearing an older sock, does detach this grit during the foot's downward passage, so that you seldom later feel irritating particles rolling around under your arch as you depart for the subway.

should I keep hammering on these people or drop it?" I put the stapled papers in one of my Eldon trays, not sure whether I would forward them to Abelardo or not. Then I slipped my shoe back on by flipping it on its side, hooking it with my foot, and shaking it into place. I accomplished all this by foot-feel; and when I crouched forward, over the papers on my desk, to reach the untied shoelace, I experienced a faint surge of pride in being able to tie a shoe without looking at it.

At that moment, Dave, Sue, and Steve, on their way to lunch, waved as they passed by my office. Right in the middle of tying a shoe as I was, I couldn't wave nonchalantly back, so I called out a startled, overhearty "Have a good one, guys!" They disappeared. I pulled the left shoelace tight, and, *bingo*, it broke.

The curve of incredulosity and resignation I rode out at that moment was a kind caused in life by a certain class of events, disruptions of physical routines, such as:

(a) reaching a top step but thinking there is another step there and stamping down on the landing

(b) pulling on the red thread that is supposed to butterfly a Band-Aid wrapper and having it wrest free from the paper without tearing it

(c) drawing a piece of Scotch Tape from the roll that resides half sunk in its black, weighted Duesenberg of a dispenser, hearing the slightly descending whisper of adhesive-coated plastic detaching itself from the back of the tape to come (descending in pitch because the strip, while amplifying the sound, is also getting longer as you pull on it²), and then, just as you are intending to break the piece off over the metal serration, reaching the innermost end of the roll, so that the segment you have been pulling wafts unexpectedly free. Especially now, with the rise of Post-it notes, which have made the massive black tape dispensers seem even more grandiose and Biedermeier and tragically defunct, you almost believe that you will never come to the end of a roll of tape; and when you do, there is a feel-

²When I was little I thought it was called Scotch Tape because the word "Scotch" imitated the descending screech of early cellophane tapes. As incandescence gave way before fluorescence in office lighting, Scotch Tape, once yellowish-transparent, became bluish-transparent, as well as superbly quiet.

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ing, nearly, though very briefly, of shock and grief

(d) attempting to staple a thick memo, and looking forward, as you begin to lean on the brontosaur head of the stapler arm,³ to the three phases of the act—

first, before the stapler arm makes contact with the paper, the resistance of the spring that keeps the arm held up;

then, *second*, the moment when the small independent unit in the stapler arm noses into the paper and begins to force the two points of the staple into and through it; and,

third, the felt crunch, like the chewing of an ice cube, as the twin tines of the staple emerge from the underside of the paper and are bent by the two troughs of the template in the stapler's base, curving inward in a crab's embrace of your memo, and finally disengaging from the machine completely—

but finding, as you lean on the stapler with your elbow locked and your breath held and it slumps toothlessly to the paper, that it has run out of staples. How could something this consistent, this incremental, betray you? (But then you are consoled: you

³Staplers have followed, lagging by about ten years, the broad stylistic changes we have witnessed in train locomotives and phonograph tonearms, both of which they resemble. The oldest staplers are cast-ironic and upright, like coal-fired locomotives and Edison wax-cylinder players. Then, in mid-century, as locomotive manufacturers discovered the word "streamlined," and as tonearm designers housed the stylus in aerodynamic ribbed plastic hoods that looked like a train curving around a mountain, the people at Swingline and Bates tagged along, instinctively sensing that staplers were like locomotives in that the two prongs of the staple make contact with a pair of metal hollows which, like the paired rails under the wheels of the train, forces them to follow a pre-set path, and that they were like phonograph tonearms in that both machines, roughly the same size, make sharp points of contact with their respective media of informational storage. (In the case of the tonearm, the stylus retrieves the information, while in the case of the stapler the staple binds it together as a unit—the order, the shipping paper, the invoice: *boom*, stapled, a unit; the letter of complaint, the copies of cancelled checks and receipts, the letter of apologetic response: *boom*, stapled, a unit; a sequence of memos and telexes holding the history of some interdepartmental controversy: *boom*, stapled, one controversy. In old stapled problems, you can see the t.b. vaccine marks in the upper-left corner where staples have been removed and replaced, removed and replaced, as the problem—even the staple holes of the problem—was copied and sent on to other departments for further action, copying, and stapling.) And then the great era of squareness set in: BART was the ideal for trains, while AR and Bang & Olufsen turntables became angular—no more cream-colored bulbs of plastic! The people at Bates and Swingline again were drawn along, riding their devices of all softening curvatures and offering black rather than the interestingly textured tan. And now, of course, the high-speed trains of France and Japan have reverted to aerodynamic profiles reminiscent of *Popular Science* cities-of-the-future covers of the fifties; and soon the stapler will incorporate a toned-down pompadour swoop as well. Sadly, the tonearm's stylistic progress has slowed, because all the buyers who would appreciate an up-to-date Soviet Realism in the design are buying CD players: its inspirational era is over.

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get to reload it, laying bare the stapler arm and dropping a long zithering row of staples into place; and later, on the phone, you get to toy with the piece of the staples you couldn't fit into the stapler, breaking it into smaller segments, making them dangle on a hinge of glue.)

In the aftermath of the broken-shoelace disappointment, irrationally, I pictured Dave, Sue, and Steve as I had just seen them and thought, "Cheerful wipe-heads!" because I had probably broken the shoelace by transferring the social energy that I had had to muster in order to deliver a chummy "Have a good one!" to them from my awkward shoe tier's crouch into the force I had used in pulling on the shoelace. Of course, it would have worn out sooner or later anyway. It was the original shoelace, and the shoes were the very ones my father had bought me two years earlier, just after I had started this job, my first out of college—so the breakage was a sentimental milestone of sorts. I rolled back in my chair to study the rupture, imagining the smiles on my three co-workers' faces suddenly vanishing if I had really called them cheerful wipe-heads, and regretting this burst of ill-feeling toward them.

As soon as my gaze fell to my shoes, however, I was reminded of something that should have struck me the instant the shoelace had first snapped. The day before, as I was getting ready for work, my *other* shoelace, the right one, had snapped, too, as I was yanking it tight to tie it, under very similar circumstances. I repaired it with a knot, just as I was planning to do now with the left. I was surprised—more than surprised—to think that after almost two years my right and left shoelaces could fail less than two days apart. Apparently my shoe-tying routine was so unvarying and robotic that over those hundreds of mornings I had inflicted identical levels of wear on both laces. The near-simultaneity was exciting—it made the variables of private life seem suddenly graspable and law-abiding.

I moistened the splayed threads of the snapped-off piece and twirled them into a damp, unwholesome minaret. Breathing steadily and softly through my nose, I was able to guide the saliva-sharpened leader thread through the eyelet without too much trouble. And then I grew uncertain. In order for the shoelaces to have worn to the

breaking point on almost the same day, they would have had to be tied almost exactly the same number of times. But when Dave, Sue, and Steve passed my office door, I had been in the middle of tying one shoe—*one shoe only*. And in the course of a normal day it wasn't at all unusual for one shoe to come untied independent of the other. In the morning, of course, you always tied both shoes, but random midday comings-undone would have to have constituted a significant proportion of the total wear on both of these broken laces, I felt—possibly thirty per cent. And how could I be positive that this thirty per cent was equally distributed—that right and left shoes had come randomly undone over the last two years with the same frequency?

I tried to call up some sample memories of shoe tying to determine whether one shoe tended to come untied more often than another. What I found was that I did not retain a single specific engram of tying a shoe, or a pair of shoes, that dated from any later than when I was four or five years old, the age that I had first learned the skill. Over twenty years of empirical data was lost forever, a complete blank. But I suppose this is often true of moments of life that are remembered as major advances: the discovery is the crucial thing, not its repeated later applications. As it happened, the first *three* major advances in

my life, and I will list all the advances here—

1. shoe tying
2. pulling up on shoelaces before tying
3. steadying hand against sneaker when tying
4. brushing tongue as well as teeth
5. putting on deodorant after I was fully dressed
6. discovering that sweeping was fun
7. ordering a rubber stamp with my address on it to make bill paying more efficient
8. deciding that brain cells ought to die—

have to do with shoe tying, but I don't think that this fact is very unusual. Shoes are the first adult machines we are given to master. I made several attempts to learn the skill, but it was not until my mother placed a lamp on the floor so that I could clearly see the dark laces of a pair of new dress shoes that I really mastered it; she explained again how to form the introductory platform knot, which began high in the air as a frail, heart-shaped loop, and shrank as you pulled the plastic lace tips down to a short twisted kernel three-eighths of an inch long, and she showed me how to progress from that base to the main cotyledonary string figure, which was, as it turned out, not a true knot but an illusion, a trick that you performed on the lace string by bending segments of it back on themselves and tightening other temporary bends around them: it looked like a knot and functioned like a knot, but the whole thing was really an amaz-



"Yes or no?"



ing interdependent pyramid scheme, which much later I connected with a couplet of Pope's:

Man, like the gen'rous vine, sup-
ported lives;
The strength he gains is from
th'embbrace he gives.

Another advance I made by myself in the middle of a playground, when I halted, out of breath, to tie a sneaker,⁴ my mouth on my interesting-smelling knee, a closeup view of anthills and the tread marks of other sneakers before me (the best kind, Keds, I think, or Red Ball Flyers, had a perimeter of asymmetrical triangles, and a few concavities in the center which printed perfect domes of dust), and found as I retied the shoe that I was doing it automatically, without having to concentrate on it as I had done at first, and, more important, that somewhere

⁴Sneaker knots were quite different from dress knots—when you pulled the two loops tight at the end, the logic of the knot you had just created became untraceable; while in the case of dress-lace knots you could, even after tightening, follow the path of the knot around with your mind, as if riding a roller coaster. You could imagine a sneaker-shoelace and a dress-shoelace knot standing side by side saying the pledge of allegiance: the dress-shoelace knot would pronounce each word as a grammatical unit, understanding it as more than a sound; the sneaker-shoelace knot would run the words together. The great advantage of sneakers, though, one of the many advantages, was that when you had tied them tightly, without wearing socks, and worn them all day, and gotten them wet, and taken them off before bed, your feet would display the impression of the chrome eyelets in red rows down the sides of your foot, like the portholes in a Jules Verne submarine.

over the past year since I had first learned the basic moves I had evidently evolved two little sub-steps of my own *that nobody had showed me*. In one I held down a temporarily taut stretch of shoelace with the side of my thumb; in the other I stabilized my hand with a middle finger propped against the side of the sneaker during some final manipulations. The advance here was my recognition that I had independently developed refinements of technique in an area where nobody had indicated there were refinements to be found: I had personalized an already adult procedure.

AFTER I finished the repair knot, a lump with two frizzed ends just below the top pair of eyelets, I pulled on the tongue of the shoe—one of the little preludes to tying that my father had showed me—and gingerly began the regulation knot. I took special care to scale down the bunny's ear that I had to form from the now shorter lace end, so that there would be enough leeway to pull it tight without mishap.⁵

When the lace was finally tied, I tapped both shoe toes on the carpeting

⁵I don't like it when you end up with only one of the two bunny's ears that make up a normal bow, for if for some reason the lace end forming that one ear works free you have no backup and you end up with a square knot that you have to tease untied with your fingernails, blood rushing to your head.

and said, shaking my head, "Nothing holds me back for long, man." Then I stood, rolled my chair back into place, and took a step toward my office door.

But as soon as I took that step I experienced a sharpening of dissatisfaction with the whole notion that my daily acts of shoe tying could have alone worn out my shoelaces. What about the variety of tiny stretchings and pullings that the shoe itself exerted on its laces as I walked around? Walking was what wore down my heels; walking was what put the creases in my shoe toes—was I supposed to discount the significance of walking in the chafing of my laces? I remembered shots in movies of a rope that held up a bridge cutting itself against a sharp rock as the bridge swayed. Even if the shoelace's fabric moved only millimetrically against its eyelet with each step, that sawing back and forth might eventually cut through the outer fibres, though the lace would not actually pop until a relatively large force, such as the first tug I gave it when tying, was applied.

All right! Much better! This walking-flexion model (as I styled it to myself, in opposition to the earlier pulling-and-fraying model) accounted for the coincidence of yesterday's and today's breakages very well, I thought. Still, if it were true that the laces frayed from walking flexion, why did they invariably fray only in contact with the top pair of eyelets on each shoe? I paused in my doorway, looking out at the rest of the office, resisting this further unwelcome puzzlement. I had never heard of a shoelace parting over some middle eyelet. Possibly the stress of walking fell most forcefully on the lace bent around the top eyelets, just as the stress of pulling the laces tight to tie them did. It was conceivable, though scary to imagine, that the pull-fray model and the walk-flex model mingled their coefficients so subtly that human agency would never accurately apporportion cause.

Freed, for the instant, from further lace concern, I moved the green magnetized plastic puck next to my name on the sign-out board from IN to OUT, bringing it in line with Dave's, Sue's, and Steve's pucks, wrote "Lunch," in matching green Magic Marker, in the space provided for explanation, and walked out without a care in the world.

—NICHOLSON BAKER