

A Stonemason Evening

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“Drama is the hardest to write,” Cormac McCarthy is saying. “Novels and other forms of literature are difficult, but drama is the hardest. It’s unusual to get two outstanding playwrights in a century.”¹ McCarthy has just seen an abridged production of his own five-act play *The Stonemason*, presented at The Arts Alliance Center at Clear Lake as its major fund raising event for 2001. This is a coup any way you count it. McCarthy is widely considered the best American novelist at work today, and some of his books—*Suttree*, *Blood Meridian*, *All the Pretty Horses*—are already recognized as contemporary American classics. It’s also safe to say that the magnificence of other less-read works such as *The Crossing*, the philosophical heart of his Border Trilogy, will challenge and reward readers for generations to come. *The Stonemason*, his major dramatic work, serves as a companion to *The Crossing*: both illustrate McCarthy’s compelling spiritual view with a stunning emotion and sensitivity not always recognized in the other books.

Also, *The Stonemason* has never been publicly performed, although it has come close on several occasions. When the president of TAACCL, Kay Burnett, first approached McCarthy about doing the play, he replied, “That’s very nice, Kay. But you might want to reconsider” and then recounted the other near misses. Not only is drama hard, it can be heart-breaking as well. But Kay Burnett was not easily dissuaded.

The idea first came from El Paso attorney and long-time McCarthy friend Malcolm McGregor, who was visiting the Arts Center building as it was being renovated in August of 2000. Looking down from the balcony into the central room below, he said, “This would be a perfect setting for Cormac’s play.” Although Kay Burnett admired McCarthy’s novels, she had never heard of *The Stonemason*. Nevertheless, she committed to the idea immediately.

After negotiating the rights, TAACCL set about planning for a major, full-length production, the idea being to perform the show for four weekends in October, 2001. Peter Webster, a remarkable young director-teacher of opera and drama at Tulane, was chosen to direct the play, and Bruce Price signed on as production manager. It soon began to look as if, after previous disappointments, *The Stonemason* might finally take the public stage.

The fact is, however, that *The Stonemason* is a difficult and ambitious play to produce, especially for a small arts center. The drama tells two interwoven stories, and it tells them in two different styles. First, there’s the

relationship between Ben Telfair, a young black construction worker, and his grandfather, known as Papaw. Papaw is a true stonemason; his grandson is one in training, and his adoration of the old man forms the crux of the play. “He was an old man before I was born and I have loved him all my life and love him now,” Ben tells us. He then relates the life of his grandfather and the knowledge he has gained through working with Papaw in a series of remarkable monologues, quite easily among the most beautiful and moving passages McCarthy has ever written.

During these monologues, McCarthy intended two “Bens” to occupy the stage, one delivering the speeches and a second “mute” double to perform some of the physical actions being described. It’s a fascinating concept, but one not easily solved dramatically, for the two presentations, one spoken and one in pantomime, have to occur simultaneously on the stage. This part of the play is dreamlike, spiritual: part memory and part prayer.

The second story is set in a realistic present tense. It tells of the extended Telfair family: Ben and his wife, Maven; his parents Big Ben and Mama; his sister Carlotta and her teenaged son Soldier. They, plus Papaw, live together in a three-level house in Louisville, Kentucky, in the early 1970s. This story line explores common social issues of racism, drug abuse, criminality, marital infidelity, and suicide. It also provides a realistic framework on which the philosophical “dream play” monologues are fixed. We might, in fact, see the monologues as a chorus of sorts, commenting on the present-time action.

But the requirements of these two stories are daunting when you’re considering the physical limits of the stage, especially a small one. The novelistic scope of *The Stonemason*, the problems of casting the various roles, and the conflicting dramatic styles of the two narratives had proved difficult to every previously attempted production. Therefore, Peter Webster began looking for ways to pare the play down while retaining the truth of the work.

He hit on two concepts. One was to cut the play mostly to selected monologues, delivered by one actor portraying Ben and occasionally Papaw. All other characters and plot lines were excised. But to acknowledge the loss, Webster determined to post excerpts from the text on the walls of the theater. “This is a book,” he argued, and he wanted the audience entering the theater to feel that it had “stepped inside the book.”

The second was to simplify the stage so that it consisted of only a platform and a lectern, behind which the actor, Manning Mpinduzi-Mott, would stand to deliver his lines. But to this stark setting he added other media effects. He brought in music: The Marian Anderson String Quartet, an accomplished group of African-American musicians, would set the tone and provide transitions between the monologues by playing from Antonin

Dvorak's "The American Quartet," a work built upon traditional American music, folk and spiritual. And behind the stage Webster draped a cloth serving as a scrim on which he would back-project a constant series of photographs, taken by Webster himself. These would be visual images from McCarthy's writing: rocks, cemeteries, trees, and, most importantly, the faces and eyes and hands of old men, their skin carved and etched by time. During the play, these images would form and fade behind Mpinduzi-Mott, one into another, much as the poetic monologues in the full-length play provide the backdrop of memory and dream against which the present-time events occur.

Finally, the ambitious four-weekend production was condensed into one special night, "The Stonemason Evening." This version might be but a portion of the whole work, but, after a year of planning, the long-awaited premiere of Cormac McCarthy's play was finally about to take place.

This twelfth of October is hot and humid in Houston. A wind and rain storm is on the way, and you can feel the change in the air. Inside the Arts Center, the air conditioner is working overtime to little effect, but no one seems to mind, for Cormac McCarthy himself has agreed to attend this performance, a second coup to add to this already special evening. McCarthy is a private man who chooses his public appearances carefully. But he has many friends in this audience, and he feels an allegiance to the Arts Center, and friendship and allegiance are strong motivations in his life. The crowd of some 150 people awaits his arrival, and murmurs of "Is he here yet?", "Have you seen him?", even "Where's ol' Cormac?" can be heard.

He comes in quickly and unobtrusively with his brother Dennis. They are both wearing sports coats and jeans, and the resemblance between the two is obvious. In these times of difficult travel, McCarthy and his family have spent the entire day getting from Santa Fe to Houston, waiting in airport lines, circling Hobby, driving to the Hyatt where they are staying. But if he is exhausted or irritated at the delays, he doesn't show it; instead, he smiles and shakes hands and speaks to his friends with warm ease.

In this audience is a group of academics and lay readers, members of the Cormac McCarthy Society, who have come from both local and distant places to see the play and, just maybe, to meet the author we have been teaching and admiring and writing on for years. Most of us hang back on the sideline out of respect, but when the opportunity comes, we sidle in and he greets us politely, holding out his hand and introducing himself – "Cormac McCarthy" – with a little smile that makes us feel less intrusive. It's an unaffected display of social grace that relieves us all.

"How in the world did all of you learn about this?" Dennis McCarthy later asks, clearly impressed-or perhaps amused-that some of us

would travel over a thousand miles to participate in this event. We point to our Texas mole from the University of Texas-Austin who had first alerted us to the production. Dennis smiles. He knows his brother is a great writer, and although he is protective of Cormac's privacy, he seems gratified that some of us would make such a trip. When I tell him that I think *Suttree*, McCarthy's fourth novel, is "the greatest novel ever written about Knoxville," he responds without a beat, "I think it's the greatest novel ever written," and all I can do is laugh with pleasure at the unabashed pride he shows.

When the lights dim, McCarthy, his wife Jennifer, and Dennis sit near the back of the room, inconspicuous members blending into the anonymous audience, waiting for the play to begin.

It's a short production, just over an hour including the musical interludes. When Mpinduzi-Mott comes on stage, he's wearing a tuxedo instead of the overalls and tee shirt he's pictured in on the program. He delivers his lines like an orator, a preacher, and for a time this seems wrong to me since my reading of the play imagines a meditative figure struggling with an awareness of his failings, with a desire for justification and forgiveness.

Later I will reread McCarthy's stage directions in which he refers to the monologues as a form of "chautauqua," a public lecture or performance, and I can understand how this artistic choice was made. But the directions also tell us that "The speaker has an agenda which centers upon his own exoneration, his own salvation" (6), and I regret that this "agenda," this complexity of character, has had to be sacrificed.

The monologues, edited and separated from the rest of the play, now seem too sentimental. They emphasize the charming, irascible, yet totally honest and moral old man who, in his trade, would break his wooden level and demand a new one, "Not in anger, but only to safeguard the true" (66). But darker, more difficult moments from the play are lost; the "gravity" that holds the work together is diminished. The performance entertains, certainly, and at times Mpinduzi-Mott's delivery of McCarthy's lines catches your breath, but you know in your heart that much has been omitted. Still, what's there is good, solid, and the audience stands at the end of the performance, applauding and nodding their heads in approval.

McCarthy, of course, chooses not to come forward when he is introduced at the end, but he does smile and wave his hand so that the audience can see him. Crowds quickly surround him, and he graciously accepts their praise. The novelist-screenwriter-photographer Bill Wittliff tells him, "This was so well done." A few people, caught up in the moment, ask him to sign their programs although we've been advised not to, and he does. Jaws drop in unison among the Society members. McCarthy's auto-

graph is relatively hard to come by. Signed first editions of *The Stonemason* are being sold for \$700 as part of the TAACCL fund raising; autographed first editions of *Blood Meridian* and some of the earlier Southern novels can go for as much as \$4000-\$5000. And here's McCarthy handing them out to these few bold, lucky souls. It's a safe bet that you'll not see these programs for sale on eBay.

Later I find him alone and we talk for a while about the play. "Drama is the hardest to write," he says. Soon he asks if I've seen Manning Mott, and when he finds the actor, he gives him a hug. People continue to mill about the room. Although there's a storm coming, no one wants to leave. As long as McCarthy stays, we stay. Around eleven, Cormac walks up to Dennis, puts a hand on his shoulder, and says, "Well, Bud, are you going to be here all night?" Actually, I don't remember for sure if he said "Bud," but I'd like to think he did. No one writes about brothers and male companionship better than McCarthy, and you clearly apprehend the affection and friendship between these two men. "Look at this," he then says, holding up a glass jar. Inside is something baffling: a small, erect humanoid skeleton, constructed of tiny bones, topped by the skull of a mouse. Spreading out from its shoulders is a magnificent pair of what looks like dragonfly wings. It's a gloriously grotesque figure. "Where did you get it?" Dennis asks, delighted. "Somebody gave it to me," Cormac answers, pleased with the gift.

And it is a great gift, emblem of McCarthy's own remarkable renditions of monstrous grace, horrifying mercy. But tonight it seems a little too horrific, for tonight has been a celebration of humanity, of justice and love and redemption. We stand together for a moment more, admiring the effigy, and then Cormac and Dennis nod in agreement, shake hands with us once again, and bid us good night and safe journeys.

The evening is done, and such evenings are rare indeed and long to be remembered.

NOTE

1. This review was originally published in *State of the Arts at Clear Lake* (November/December 2001). Reprinted with permission of The Arts Alliance Center at Clear Lake (Houston, TX).