

FROM THE BALCONY RAIL

Damn New York Designers!

Not long ago I ran into Sam on the street of a mid-western city. I had not seen Sam for several years, and he looked older than he should have. He was graying, baggy of eye, and choleric of complexion. The double burden of hard times and compensatory drinking had soured his looks and his personality. The burnt out particles of his filament coated his soul and dimmed his light.

When I asked how things were going he shook his head and cursed, "Damn New York designers!"

There was a bar nearby and after several drinks Sam was talking at a ten reading. His story was rather simple. He made a living teaching part time, renting out a small stock of equipment, and working the decreasing number of road shows that came in for a few weeks each year. But he had a degree as a designer and wanted to design. The shutters of his life were stuck in the closed position.

There were two local theatres, one ballet company, and one opera company. Sam had gone to each in search of design work. The answer in each case was the same, "Sorry, we only hire New York designers." Sam felt like a 110 strobe plugged into 220.

He knew some of the designers who came to town — he had gone to school with them and had done just as well as they had. He saw the work they did for the local companies and knew in his ferrite core that he could do as well as the farmer in ringers. Often, they had little sense of the space in which they worked.

They didn't know the local crews or the peculiarities of local practice. More importantly, they flew into town, spent as little time as possible, and flew out again,

rushing to another pressing commitment.

Sam went back again and again to the managers of the local groups. To prove himself he offered to design a show for nothing. He would clean the stables or labor seven years. Even these classic methods would not move the managers. They needed a contact with New York.

There was powerful magic in New York. It was as if the travelers arrived from Manhattan carrying a piece of the true cross, a relic that gave professional legitimacy to a regional enterprise. The New York designer was not valuable for the work he did but as an amulet to ensure success. He became a mascot, a rabbit's foot, a lucky penny found in the gutter of Gotham. Sam could not compete with such powerful magic. His spells were candelabra lamps and theirs were carbon arcs.

I didn't have to ask Sam why he didn't move to New York. He had a family, friends, a house. He was a prefocus lamp, angled just the right way, only no one would turn him on. Besides, he hated big cities.

Several weeks later, the Union had a meeting to discuss new contract rates for regional theatres and opera companies. Harry, an old friend whom I hardly saw any more, was there speaking with great authority on the need for higher rates, better per diem, and first class accommodations. Harry was a 9 x 12 in the proceeding, focusing the group's attention on details that were clear to him. He had experience in just about every regional theatre there was. He gave examples to illustrate why certain contract provisions were necessary and some were not.



By Beeb Salzer

After a vote was taken, I caught Harry out in the hall. "How about a drink sometime or lunch?" Harry said he would have to look at his date book.

"Can't then . . . be in Indiana. No, not then, off to Florida. Vermont the next week and then over to Ohio."

It became clear that he spent four-fifths of his time away from New York. I asked him how his family liked him being away so much of the time.

Harry told me that he and his wife had experienced some rough times, but that they had come to an agreement. She and the kids had moved to Connecticut where her family lived and where she would not feel so lonely. Harry spent as much time there as he could.

"Then you are seldom in New York?"

"Not much. I have a studio in the 30s . . . more for mail and answering service. That New York address is important. When I'm not on the road I try to stay in Connecticut."

"Do you see many shows here?"

"3 or 4 a year, ones I have to see because someone gives me tickets. There are always things I want to see, but never have the time to get to. I am going all the time. This kind of life is a killer. I'm a human tracer. I wish there were some way to stay put."

Harry and I never did have lunch. He was always too busy. But every time I read a review from some far off theatre and see Harry's name in the credits I think of Sam and the way he said, "Damn New York designers!" Maybe there is no mystery to life — it's just a sine wave. □