

NULL SET #4, from Felice Rolfe, 1360 Emerson, Palo Alto, Calif. 94301.
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activity requirements of the Neffer Amateur Press Association, which are
quite ridiculous this time because of my failure to keep track of them.

REINSTATEMENT RAMBLINGS

I have a confession to make. When the last N'APA mailing reached me -- that would be the one before the last one you got -- I was too busy even to look at it. It's still nicely wrapped up in its envelope. That's how come I didn't notice my shaky status. Anyway -- Bruce has considerably reinstated me and sent me the last (the real last) mailing, so here I am, with hopefully a good balance between mailing comments and original material.

What have I been so busy with? Mainly one thing -- the American Conservatory Theatre. ACT (remember them?) signed with San Francisco, as mentioned in NULL SET #3, and moved into town a few weeks before Christmas.

Meanwhile, on the basis of the enthusiasm for theater which ACT aroused in me last summer, I volunteered my services as a mimeographer to Stanford Repertory Theatre and they sure took me up on it. Besides numerous issues of the SRT Volunteers' Newsletter, NIEKAS Press has run off several thousand copies of the study guides for Antony and Cleopatra and the Beggar's Opera.

Shortly after ACT came to town somebody mentioned that they were snowed under with clerical work, so one Saturday I wandered up there, typer in hand, and volunteered. When you tell that outfit you want to help, they believe you. Ever since then, I've been putting in one day a week at their offices (or as close to a day as was possible). At one point I found myself editor of a newsletter, and that would have involved evenings as well as weekends -- sometimes until 2 or 3 a.m., if the first issue was anything to go by. But the guy who'd drafted me was transferred to the box office, and the new Community Relations Director (as the post is known) didn't know anything about the newsletter; nor, it turned out, did anyone else in the company. So what with one thing and another (mostly the cost) it slid back into limbo, and I heaved a sigh of relief. I'd have done it if they wanted; but with NIEKAS, NULL SET and CALI, another publication I don't need.

(All this time, of course, I'm still holding down a 40-hour job with Sylvania. They are turning me into a technical editor and a fair journeyman writer. You'd even think I know what those engineers are talking about.)

ACT is both a teaching company and a true repertory theater. Rather than doing four plays a year sequentially, as most "repertory" theaters do, ACT is presenting 16 plays in a 22-week season, and all will run the full length of the season. Not every night, of course; but they opened in January, and latecomers will be able to see all the plays until it becomes temporally impossible.* When the performers aren't in rehearsal or on stage, they're in class. ACT teaches everything from voice and the Alexander method (whatever that is) to theater accounting. The hours are

*That usage ought not to throw you science fiction fans.

appalling. Everyone works a 12 to 14 hour day six days a week. The company gives 16 performances a week. They don't have a star system; actors like Rene Auberjonois or Michael O'Sullivan are likely to get the leads, of course, but they don't bring people in from outside, and the star of one play may have a relatively minor part in another. (O'Sullivan as GBS in "Dear Liar", and the Cardinal in "Tiny Alice"; Paul Shenar as Brother Julian in "Tiny Alice" and as Johnny Tarleton in "Misalliance".) As for quality -- well, I'm a mathematician, not a drama critic; but it doesn't take an expert in the field to recognize thorough competence and that indefinable something beyond it that reviewers call brilliance.

And they're not artistic snobs. The program this season ranges from "Charley's Aunt" through Moliere's "Tartuffe" to Beckett's depressing "Endgame", and they do each splendidly. There's nothing of the pretentiousness that Gilbert caricatured so well in "Patience". ("...If this young man expresses himself in terms too deep for me/Why, what a very singularly deep young man this deep young man must be!" One runs into this fairly often everywhere, but it's rather more common in the arts than in the sciences. It's what makes people like me take a dim view of the adjective 'artistic'.*)

All is not sweetness and light, of course. In fact I've begun to realize where the terms "backstage politics" and "behind-the-scenes maneuvering" originated. There were a couple of weeks when I nearly quit in disgust -- about the time that the CR Director, who seemed perfectly competent, was shifted. His successor is also perfectly competent, but that's not the point; the point is, how long will this one last, and will I have to adjust to a series of them? Having talked to a fair number of the more influential local people as well as to members of the company, I got the impression that (a) there was some sophisticated backstabbing going on, and (b) that I wasn't supposed to know about it because I'm "public"; that I was, in effect, being handled with care. Well, if you've read my education editorial in NIEKAS you can imagine how I reacted to that. (Though the idea of anyone's thinking he had to -- or could -- handle me with care is ridiculous enough to be redeeming.)

Aha, I hear you say, Felice is tilting at windmills again. Maybe so. But internal power politics has definite practical disadvantages. ACT has no trouble attracting capable people, but holding them could be another matter. It has enough to offer actors to make up for a lot of uncertainty, but it offers very little except hard, dull work to non-performers. The least, the rock-bottom I would accept from any job, is the assurance that my job depends on my merits rather than on some whim from Mahogany Row. This is true anywhere. The most efficient operation is one which doesn't waste its employees' energies on infighting. ACT in particular needs competence badly in the business office; at present it has more than its share of conscientious, capable people, and still customer complaints pile up; it must keep these people.

Well, maybe I was reading more into it than was there, because of the attempt to smooth it over. (That's the danger of any "handle with care" policy, y'know.) But after a long, hard look at the company, I've decided it doesn't matter. ACT is good enough, and the idea behind it is valid enough, that it's worth my work and trouble anyway. Perhaps that marks an

*Whether artist or engineer, the man who is pretentious about his work is seldom really good at it. Stephen Pickering, fandom's own sociologist, has recently furnished a graphic example of this.

increase in maturity since I ran afoul of Education, but more likely it's just that as a volunteer (and one who's not even interested in Having Special Privileges, let alone in Being a Big Wheel), I'm safe from the politics.

Sometimes people ask me why the work; wouldn't buying tickets be enough support? No, not really. I'm not the spectator type -- the more deeply involved I am the more fun it is. And the damndest things happen up there! (Not the least strange of which is that I can spend the day filing index cards, which is certainly not the world's most exciting job, and come home exhilarated.)

Or take the time a dark-haired hurrican named Bobby blew into the room, gathered us all up and scooped us off to one of the studios to scream for the soundtrack of "Tiny Alice". (This guy lives at a dead run and turns corners by rebounding off the wall like a billiard ball. Last Sunday I saw him standing still and nearly didn't recognize him.) We spent about half an hour doing warming-up exercises, learning to scream without hurting our throats, and after that it didn't seem at all silly to holler bloody murder at a microphone. There are unexpected benefits to this sort of thing, too. In what must have been a purely internal joke, one of the bits of business in "The Torchbearers" (a play about amateur theater) consisted of the same exercises. It was funny enough to the rest of the audience but absolutely hysterical to me.

Another day, a cold, wet Saturday, I had an errand in the theater about 6:00. It was opening night, in fact. As I came into the lobby a little man stopped me. He was in his early fifties, probably, and stiff and uncomfortable in his best suit, which was none too good. He wanted to talk to a member of the company. (I was obviously not dressed as a patron.) I explained that I was just a volunteer, but that was all right with him; he wanted to talk about ACT. A few nights earlier he'd come to the preview which was held for off-duty cab drivers and their wives. He'd never been to a play before in his "whole entire life", and the play was "Tartuffe", which isn't all that easy to start out on. He loved it. So here he was, all dressed up, hoping someone would sell him a ticket even though he'd heard that the cheapest seats on opening night were \$25. (I dunno if that was true or not.) We talked for awhile, and I'd have liked to talk longer, but I really had to finish my errand; so when Auberjonois came out to do something utilitarian I said "Why don't you help Tartuffe?" Last I saw of the man, he was beaming from ear to ear at the chance to be useful and meet the star of the play at the same time. Bet that's one we've converted from TV.

It makes me hope ACT will realize that little people, unintellectual people, will become interested in theater too if given the chance. Theater has traditionally depended on the professional and the socialite for support; and theaters have traditionally gone broke. ACT is doing so many new things that I hope they'll break with this particular tradition as well. (Especially the going broke part.)

So that's what's been keeping me busy the last couple of months. It's a joy to watch ACT's plays (even more fun to watch rehearsals though), and it's a groovy place to work -- for a volunteer. I love the people I've met there. They're a welcome change from Outer Suburbia! They're a lot like fans, in fact, although somewhat less kooky and a good deal more charming. I like fans or I wouldn't be in this business, but we're notoriously hard up for charm, you must admit...Perhaps most impressive is that I haven't met anyone whose ability I don't respect. That's not too usual.

THE MASK OF APOLLO (Mary Renault, Pantheon Books -- apparently the Book-of-the-Month Club division of Random House -- New York, 1966.)

Mary Renault of THE KING MUST DIE and THE BULL FROM THE SEA has a new book out, right in line with my current monomania. (Remember when I bored you with the Cyrano-D'Artagnan kick?) THE MASK OF APOLLO is set in Greece of the time of Plato. The central story is the life of Nikeratos the Athenian tragic actor; his tours, his loves (as it says in the blurb), and his growth as an artist. Mainly the last. Theater in those days was sacred to Dionysios and actors were his servants; not a bad god to serve, either, better than some we have today. Niko seems to have been a servant of Apollo as well -- his favorite mask (the thought of acting with one's face bare was shocking to Niko) was of Apollo, and it was continually giving him advice.

Though Niko became a famous leading man, he was also an extra in a more far-reaching play; the fall of Syracuse. The principal in this drama was Dion; Plato was the second actor; and third man was Dionysios the Younger, Tyrant of Syracuse. The theme is a classical one -- that of a man's ruin caused by his own greatness.

Dion's name has come down to us through Plato's writing. He was a student at the Academy and a devoted follower of the philosopher. His ambition was to see Syracuse, his home, become a city ruled by law; his hubris, to think he was the only man who could bring it about. (Turned out no one could.) After years of trying to convert the Archon to Plato's teachings, he finally overthrew the tyrant and tried to form the city into a model of Plato's REPUBLIC. But the Syracusans had been ruled too long; and Dion was too unbending in his goodness and great nobleness; they killed him for it.

Most fans know Miss Renault chiefly for the two books about Theseus mentioned above. Except for her relatively recent Greek phase, most of her books have been fairly conventional boy-meets-girl romances, with an occasional boy-meets-boy novel. (Her THE CHARIOTEER, in which she takes her time to explore the latter theme, is a long, slow, but very lovely book.) Some of these romances are pretty obviously pot-boilers -- but none are entirely trivial. Nor is THE MASK OF APOLLO, though it comes close. Niko is an extra in the larger story; although his heart is in it, he's too far from the action, we can't see clearly through his eyes nor become very involved with the great deeds told. I think the best scene is at the close of the book, when he meets the young Alexander of Macedon.

But Niko is a fascinating person in himself, and the glimpses of Greek life, and especially Greek theater, are quite up to the Renault standard of clear, sparkling description. Either she has a mental link with some long-departed Hellenic playwright or she's made it all up, or both. It's a good book for fun reading. Just don't expect it to come up to THE KING MUST DIE.

Now we must get on with the mailing comments. The above, by the way, along with the comments about ACT, will no doubt be used for "Mayhem House" in NIEKAS as is my wont. If we ever get the next issue published. This coast-to-coast coediting is fraught with difficulties! But onward.

THE POPPY SEED: Is the number of pages in the mailing really representative of its quality? It might be interesting and informative for you to take the percentage of good stuff in this mailing and compare it with previous ones. I'll even accept your definition of "good". How about it?

DKP continued: I feel that raising the activity requirements to six pages a mailing would only encourage a drop in quality. Sometimes people can write 3 pp of good stuff when 6 would be too many; some people have enough trouble turning out as many as three pages of readable material. Quality and quantity are distinct, not synonymous. I liked better your suggestion that mailing comments be limited to half or less of a member's activity. We can't dispense with them entirely, because without some sort of feedback how could we improve? ##Ray's story in this issue must have been one of his early ones. It's too contrived; good fan fiction, but certainly not up to his current standards. Stephen's short is quite good. Your fiction continues to improve technically, but not, I'm afraid, in originality. ##In your MC's you say you don't do much editing for syntax and grammar. You should. Or rather, you should get someone else to do it, since if you made the goof in the first place you're unlikely to catch it. Your stuff is certainly good enough that it would be a pity not to redraft it. ##Just because your writing gets you on the Dean's list doesn't mean it's first quality -- reference Garrison's article on Gorey in NIEKAS 13. That won a national English competition, but was considered only fair fan writing. ##This all sounds much too derogatory. Actually it stems from the fact that, without thinking about it very much, I've been comparing your writing with pro work rather than with fan fiction. That in itself should be some help, I must hope. (Has anyone out there read Avram's latest book?)

ZINGARO: "What good is sf? Does it have any utility at all?" you ask. Good questions. Maybe it's significant that a few engineering schools (MIT for one, I believe), when trying to stretch their students' minds, have given them off-planet design problems. "Design a groundcar for use by unipedal beings whose manipulatory organs terminate in three opposable tentacles. Assume the planet has 0.535 earth gravity; that the atmosphere tends to form hydrogen cyanide when polluted by hydrocarbon combustion products, and that this fuel is prohibited because HCN is a dangerous euphoric to the species in question." ##Personally, I believe that any device which enables us to escape everyday life for a time, and return to it refreshed -- as sf does -- is utilitarian enough right there to justify its use. Anything more is gravy. ##I enjoyed both your book and fanzine reviews, though there's not much comment to make about them.

FRINGE: I'm glad to hear that other people have the same trouble with Christmas shopping! What happened to me this year was that, after rushing around like mad, and not getting any presents until they would have had to be airmailed back east -- and after mailing out the November/December issue of NIEKAS -- I decided to ease the P.O.'s headaches and mail the things between Christmas and New Year. Well, in February my in-laws asked to have my son visit them, so I tugged all their presents into his suitcase. Jet fare is damned expensive airmail. There are about 3 little things I haven't gotten mailed yet. As for Christmas cards -- forget it! ##I enjoy Wally's old letters muchly. Thank you for reprinting them. ##Quiet time for consolidation is very necessary, it's true; but I find that the more I'm doing, the more I can do. The poorest stuff I've done for APA L or NIEKAS has been, sometimes, stuff I had plenty of time to do.

TROGLODYTE: Have much of the San Francisco rock bands' work back there in the middle of the country? Outfits like Moby Grape, the Grateful Dead, the Jefferson Airplane, the Peanut Butter Conspiracy? San Francisco seems to be a hotbed of creativity these days...whether one likes what's being created or not. I do like the English-based R&R. First popular music I ever have liked. ...Tho I think the Conspiracy is an LA band.

HOOP 6: "Assassin" was very good. Your villain was a bit too purely villainous -- but then, we all know people like that in fandom, don't we? And refusing a con for reasons of honor is just the sort of thing a fan would do. Very nice. ##I can't agree with you -- or Ed either -- about the undesirability of being exposed to neofans during conventions. That's one of the reasons I go The Terrible Five...Greg Keith...Nate Bucklin...Johnny Chambers...these won't be neos by next convention time, but they were once. By all means, let's reduce the size of the con parties; but not by segregating neos from old timers.

John D. Berry (What is the name of your zine?): Since you asked, I'm pro-Tolkien and anti-Burroughs. Though I don't hold very violent views on either...There is one important difference between Tolkien and ERB; Tolkien is a far better writer. Now that I think of it, he has a far more interesting imagination, too. ##How do we number NIEKAS' fractional issues? According to whim, that's how...No, actually, it went something like this. #8.9 consisted of the last 3 or so pages of the letter column for #8, which we hadn't had time to finish by the N'APA deadline. #'s 9.5 and 10.5 came out exactly half-way between #'s 9 and 10, and 10 and 11. #16.1 was actually only the last page of NS 3, the form letter. By the way, we've abandoned that form letter. We've discussed apathetically some kind of form reply to save us work, but I think it doesn't really appeal to either of us. We have tried to be better lately about acknowledging letters and subs; but we are extremely fallible. (One nice thing about having a co-editor is that one can use the editorial "we" and it isn't an affectation.) ##Greg Shaw's takeoff on Stephen Pickering is simply beautiful. It really deserves much wider circulation; couldn't you send it to YANDRO or DOUBLE: BILL for reprinting? I'd like to use it in NIEKAS, but the next issue is going to be out too soon for you to see this (I hope). I have only one complaint about Greg's piece -- he uses the big words correctly...or, at least, more correctly than Pickering. Except, of course, for the ones he made up. ##Who is one of Us at the publishers of Webster's dictionaries?!

BETWEEN TIMID AND TIMBUKTU: Hi, Schu. There's not too much to comment on about your description of Valley fandom, since I've seen most of it in APA L. Your book reviews were appreciated. You do pretty well for not being in the mood to write. "When in doubt, review"? If I have time or room, I'd like to review Mary Renault's latest book, "The Mask of Apollo".

ISCARIOT: I'm a little surprised to read that you were impressed with Pickering's "writing ability". Stephen's strong point, in writing, is an incredible ability to obscure what he's saying by the way he's saying it. This is almost matched by his knack for using six-bit words just incorrectly enough that you have to check the dictionary before you groan. (Though I have seen him misuse some of his big words in a truly inspired way, as when he spoke of Bradbury's "interminable style". I think he meant "inimitable".) As for the thoroughness of his research, yes, he knows how to look up other people's opinions; I wonder if he's ever bothered to form an opinion of his own. "Religion in Science Fiction" seems to be unusually clearly written -- for Stephen.