



THE PLAYERS

by Tony Beckwith © 2002

“Oh, to be someone else for once!”
Leonce and Lena, by Georg Büchner (1813-1837)

WHEN THE HOUSE LIGHTS dimmed to darkness and the audience finally settled down, an expectant hush filled the theatre and hung in the air. Everyone backstage stood like statues, the frenzied whispering faded away, and all eyes turned to the director. He, with haggard features showing the strain of three months of rehearsals, took one last look around then jerked his thumb upward. On that signal the curtain was raised, the lights came up, and a vague murmur rose from the audience as it saw the stage for the first time.

In the magical moment of silence before the curtain went up I was in position, stage left, reclining on a bench. My face was hot under my makeup and my lacquered hair felt stiff and sticky. I was playing a prince in a play set in early nineteenth century Germany, and had been practicing my haughty demeanor for weeks. I was fifteen years old but was already a veteran of several productions, so the haughty demeanor wasn't actually that much of a challenge to my acting skills.

My whole family was involved in the theatre. My mother (who insisted that wild horses couldn't drag her onstage) was the prompter; my father turned in many stellar acting perform-

ances; and my brother, who somehow managed to look good in his filthy blue overalls, was one of the backstage boys.

The Montevideo Players was, for me, far more than a local amateur theatre group. It was an extended family, an introduction to the fascinating world of adults, and an education in many fields, not least of which was the delicate art of the love scene. When I first read the script of *Leonce and Lena*, I saw that the prince would spend some time dallying with a courtesan. I had to look that word up in the dictionary, and was very excited to discover what it meant. But my excitement knew no bounds when I heard that the role in question, Rosetta, was being played by one of the loveliest women in the group. She was nearly twice my age at the time, but she was beautiful in all the ways that matter to a teenage boy. She was also, however, the director's wife, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to rehearse my tender scene with her while he looked on. I soon learned—not for the last time—that lust can trump an awkward shyness, and I spent many blissful moments gazing at her and saying things like, “I dream over your eyes as over magic springs, deep and hidden.”

Working as an actor so early in life introduced me to the existential idea of “otherness” that was very much in

vogue at the time. Playing different roles on stage gave me a sense of diversity within myself, a feeling that there was more than just one of me. This fueled my curiosity about my own identity, prompting me to delve more deeply into the question of who I was and where I fit in the scheme of things. I wasn't the only one who felt this way. Most of the Players, who had ordinary day jobs of one kind or another, loved being involved in something so utterly different from their daily routine. My father explained that acting allowed him to step outside of himself and said that, in his opinion, exploring other realities gave us a broader understanding of the world around us—a perspective I agree with to this day. One of Prince Leonce's lines seemed to speak for us all: “Oh, to be someone else for once!” (Rosetta's husband, for example, in my case.)

Every club must have a clubhouse of some kind, and the Players had their Center. Housed in a small warehouse in an unfashionable part of town, it was drafty and cold and damp, but we loved it. There was plenty of room in the back to rehearse and build sets and store costumes. And in the front room was the all-important bar where I acquired a taste for *Doble Uruguay* beer and certainly explored my share of realities.

There was always a cast party after the final performance of every show. They were lively affairs, attended by everyone who was even remotely involved: set builders, stage hands, sound and lighting techies, props, wardrobe, makeup, front-of-house, plus family members and assorted groupies. The actors and actresses usually arrived still wearing stage makeup, and nobody went home until the wee small hours of the morning. I suppose we were all a little reluctant to leave. None of us wanted to let go of the magic and return to our ordinary lives. ★