

## *From the Playwright*

Theater is not electronic. Unlike movies and unlike television, it does require the live presence of both audience and actors in a single space. This is the theater's uniquely important advantage and function, its original religious function of bringing people together in a community ceremony where the actors are in some sense priests or celebrants, and the audience is drawn to participate with the actors in a kind of eucharist.

Where this is the admitted function of theater the playwright's work is not so much to "write a play" as to "construct a ceremony" which can be used by the actors to come together with their audience. Words are a part of this ceremony, but not necessarily the dominant part, as they are not the dominant part either in a formal religious ceremony. The important thing is what is happening between the audience and the action. At each point in constructing the ceremony the playwright must say to himself: "What is the audience experiencing now? At what point are they on their journey and where are they to be brought to next?" The "trip" for the audience must be as carefully structured as any ancient mystery or initiation. But the form must reflect contemporary thought processes. And we don't think much in a linear fashion. Ideas overlap, themes recur, archetypal figures and events transform from shape to shape as they dominate our minds.

The creation of this piece was an exploration of certain ideas and images that seem to dominate our minds and lives. The only criterion, finally, of whether or not to follow an impulse in the piece was: Did it work for us or not, in our lives, in our thoughts, and in the playing on the stage.

A large part in the creation of the ceremony was "letting go." For my part, I let go a great many words, characters and scenes. And most painfully I let go certain rigid structural concepts I had invented to replace the linear ones of a conventional play. But whatever was good of these—a funeral, a Catholic mass, an LSD trip, an inquisition, a modern mystery play—remains within the structure of the present ceremony. And so too, lengthy discussions, improvisations, and even unstated common feelings within the company remain somewhere within the final piece—in fact more, probably, than even we can remember.

When other acting groups want to perform *The Serpent* I hope that they will use the words and movements only as a skeleton on which they will put their own flesh. Because *The Serpent* is a ceremony reflecting the minds and lives of the people performing it. What I would like to think is that we have gone deep enough into ourselves to find and express some notions, some images, some feelings which will bring the actors together with the audience, and that these images, these ideas, these feelings, will be found to be held in common.

*Jean-Claude van Itallie*