

A Beneficent Magic

Philip Conkling

Where to start? At the end or the beginning of John Wulp's story? In a sense it does not much matter, because you could say that his beginnings and his endings are circular — arriving where they started for a stageman, theater director and artist, who washed ashore by accident on a Maine island more than a decade ago. Once there, he discovered the island's community and became the greatest teacher of drama to school children that the state, perhaps, has ever seen. At the North Haven school, John Wulp has achieved unimaginable successes with a drama program in a small and insular place, with its gifts for mimicry. He created not just a powerful new vision within his adopted island community, but re-created himself, one senses, in the process....

Wulp: I always ask myself, "Why did I come here?" I've never understood it. We were on this boat trying to find Great Spruce Head Island, but landed in Pulpit Harbor. As soon as I landed there I really had the oddest sensation. I thought, "Oh my God, I'm going to live here," which is really very odd, to have that strong a feeling the minute you step into a place. So that fall I came back to find a house on North Haven. I had a very clear image of the house I wanted, but I found it instead across the Thorofare on Vinalhaven.

...I came here to Maine out of a sort of desperation, really. I owned this house, but I was broke. I had no money and I had no very clear idea how I was going to support myself, but I had nowhere else to go.

The setting: North Haven Schoolhouse near the center of the island. It is a redwood-sided building



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housing grades K–12, where some 60 island children scattered across 13 grades are clustered in multi-age groupings, once common in one-room schools. As in most island communities, the school is the central institution of community life, where all its best hopes and worst fears come careening into view. Barney Hallowell, the principal, originally from a summer family, has worked in the North Haven schools for over 20 years. The origin of the island's drama program, he explains, resulted from observing many island kids' well-honed talent for mimicking their elders, often in wickedly funny ways. Hallowell recognized that his school was too small to excel in sports, but for a school to become great, it has to be good at something, anything; he

sensed that a drama program might be the ticket.

Wulp: When Barney Hallowell asked me if I would teach, in a way I grabbed at it, because I thought it was a way of improving my lot economically. I was working all the time. I worked at the lobster plant packing lobsters and I worked as a cook downtown when Phil Crossman had the Crow's Nest, because there was nowhere else to go....

The setting: North Haven Community School at a school board meeting shortly after town meeting election, in which the balance of power on the school board tilted to a majority opposed to the direction of North Haven's school program. In

addition to the basic curriculum, this program provided for off-island school trips and an arts and enrichment program.

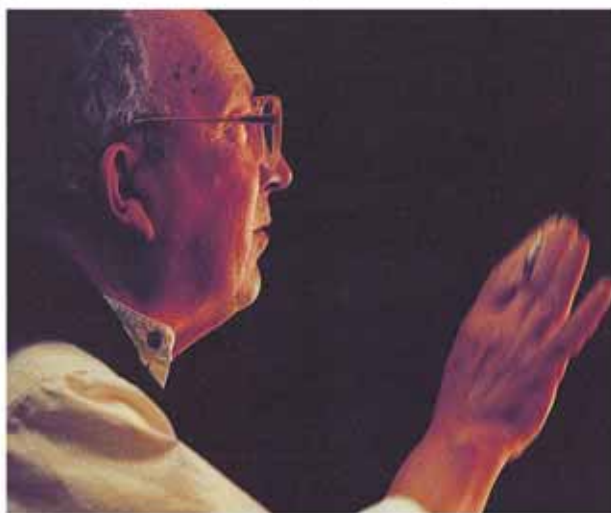
Wulp: Then we did *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: just getting it on was a big success. What happened? Well, it took about an hour and 45 minutes, whereas usually it takes about two and a half to three hours to put on. It moved with a speed and a clarity that was unusual. Again, it was a matter of a clear articulation of the text. Just say it, let the play be heard. And it was a great success....

Now, nearly every kid in the school, except those whose parents won't allow them to, has participated. I would say 90 percent of the school has

been in plays of one sort or another. And one year, we won the regional one-act play competition — and another, the state one-act competition. We've done very, very difficult material: Shakespeare, Anouilh, Thornton Wilder and Oscar Wilde. Most of the plays depend on language and the kids have learned to do this in a forthright sort of way. Certainly a study of the sort of plays we do would be demanded in any school with high academic standards.

I would like the kids to regard the theater as something holy and sacred, and that when they perform it's like this interchange between them and the audience that is, in strange ways, divine. I mean what is theater? We come together and for a moment we are joined as a community ... watching this thing in front of us that somehow defines our lives. Theater on the highest level is some sort of mystical experience. It's one of the few times when we become omniscient, like gods. You know, we watch this experience and we can understand it. We can never do that really in actual life....

The setting: North Haven Community Building, a short walk up the hill from the ferry landing. It's early April, but winter's chill clings to the water like a dark cloak. North Haven has struggled through a devastating community schism for



two long years, pitting neighbor against neighbor and family against family. Recent elections, for the school board, and resignations, among the selectmen who opposed the direction of island education that the drama program came to represent, have changed the balance of power on the island to the status quo ante. But everyone knows nothing has really changed the deep dynamics of the underlying conflict, and maybe nothing ever will.

Into this deeply disturbing situation comes the school production of *The Wind in the Willows*, a whimsical musical with a cast and production crew of over 50 kids drawn not just from North Haven, but also from Vinalhaven and Green's Island, to stage the show. A standing-room-only crowd of

over 150 people is crammed into the rows of chairs and bleachers. Down front is a delegation from the New York theater world, including the playwright, Arnold Weinstein, whose play, although written a decade ago, is being performed for the first time here tonight.

Wulp: *The Wind in the Willows* was quite a step for us because it was the first time we did an original play, that anyone entrusted us with an original play. It had never been performed before. We just did it and it worked. The kids were amazing. We used a whole new bunch of kids; we used mostly people from the lower grades. We still had to use some of the older kids like Asa and Chris Brown, but mostly they were kids just coming along.

When you see kids up there on the stage you cannot believe the kids are not getting a good education. But on the other hand, I have never been altogether able to do what I hoped — to give them enough confidence to feel that they could go anywhere and do anything they wanted to do. I think there is a fear, a certain naiveté, that is difficult to overcome. They are innocent of the world.

The cast of *The Wind in the Willows* is put together with a keen sense of the mythic identities that lie just beneath the surface of island kids, seemingly just waiting for a moment like this, for a director like this, to create the space and unlock their hearts. Ratty is as lyrical as the Mole is earnest. Badger is a high school youth who can seem to fill a door frame but who has not been on stage before Wulp came to North Haven. He is wonderfully solemn and ponderous in his portrayal of the ultimate enforcer among animals both good and bad. The slinking, black-costumed weasels and stoats are horrifically wonderful in their roles. The chorus of mice, with the heart-stopping solo performed by a flaxen-haired first grader, nearly brings the house to tears. But the show is stolen by the portrayal of the spectacular excesses of Toad, played by Jacob Greenlaw, a quiet eighth grader who works in the island grocery store. Jacob, like the play itself, is new to acting before a crowd of friends and island neighbors, new to costumery and lights, new to it all.

The production of *The Wind in the Willows* is an extraordinary display of the power of the arts to drive our worst demons back into the shadows, if only temporarily. Where the limitless energy of such a production comes from is unknowable, but the ability to find new meanings in such familiar territory is a kind of transformation. We search for this transformation in the sacred space of our lost childhood that we imagine, if only for a moment, we can recapture.

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