

PERFORMING ARTS

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The Poison Tree

CENTER THEATRE GROUP
Mark Taper
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M. Górnowski

How We Have Fallen



By Meri Nana-Ama Danquah

"Something is very close for us, an understanding, a recognition, a terrible understanding, maybe, this horrible, horrible thing I've done, that I had to do, I think, if I'm guilty. . . there are reasons why I did it, that I don't even know, that I can't even say clearly . . . I need you to understand and find forgiveness for me . . . There is hope if we take it in our hands, it's so painful to hold, but if we can see it for what it is, then we can let go."

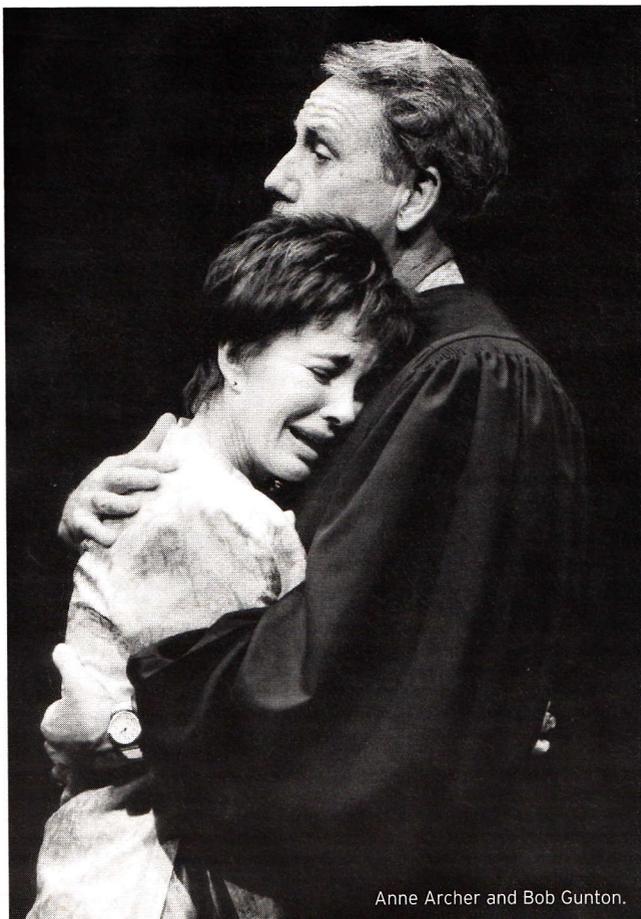
—ROBERT GLAUDINI, *THE POISON TREE*

I used to think prisons could only be brick buildings with iron bars. Huge and impersonal places on the outskirts of small towns; facilities constructed for the sole purpose of holding criminals, cruel men and cold-hearted women who would spend their future paying for the sins of their past; people who would sit, day in and day out, with pen and paper in hand, plotting escape, dreaming of freedom. People who were not deserving of our forgiveness. I used to think it was as basic as all that, as straight and narrow as a line drawn in the sand. A line separating us, who were doing right, from them, who had done wrong.

And sometimes I would even wonder about them, the people who were locked away in those buildings, locked away from the streets and the bright lights. I would wonder how had their lives landed them in that place? Yes, they had murdered, raped, stolen and lied. But before that, what were they doing? Who had they been? Did they not want more from themselves, more from the world, than what they ultimately chose? What was it that finally, finally pushed them over that edge? There must have been something that led them to that moment, to that act. Some voice within that would not soften, some wound that would not heal. There must have been a reason why.

That is what I used to think back then, a long time ago, when I believed that those of us who were on the outside of the brick buildings were so drastically different from those who were on the inside. Of course, I didn't know then what I know now. I didn't know that prisons could also be million-dollar mansions with well-manicured lawns, that temptation was nothing more than a yearning, a hunger, the pride before the fall.

Clarity comes at the oddest times. There is an experience I had not too long ago as I was on my way to meet a friend for lunch. I had my nine-year-old daughter with me in the car. We stopped at a traffic signal and sat in silence, waiting for the green go-ahead. I stared out the window and made a mental list of all the things I hoped to accomplish that day. On my dining room table there was a stack of bills that had to be paid. There were dirty clothes in the hamper that needed to be laundered, and at least three essays that were supposed to have already been written and handed in. The minutiae of my days was



Anne Archer and Bob Gunton.



L to R - Randy Oglesby, Linda Gehring, Bob Gunton, Lola Glaudini, Natsuko Ohama, Stanley Kamel, Anne Archer, Christian Camargo.

killing me. Everything was so overwhelming and out of order. I felt like I was hanging on by a thread.

Just as the light was turning, I looked out my window and saw four people sitting by the side of the road. They appeared to be a family. A white-picket-fence, two-car-garage suburban family. At second glance, though, I realized that they were not that at all. They were a homeless family. A mother, a father and their two young daughters huddled behind a small, hastily-written sign: "Please Help!" I found it hard to stop staring at them.

It wasn't as if this was my first encounter with homelessness. That condition was present on nearly every corner in our city. People with matted hair and ragged clothing standing at busy intersections with their hands open pleading for food, for money, for any small gesture, any generosity. I had grown accustomed to seeing these sorts of people. To ignoring them by looking past them, looking through them, or simply focusing my eyes forward so as not to make contact.

However, there was something different and disturbing about this family. They could have easily been my next door neighbors, my fellow PTA members. They could have easily been my friends. At one time, perhaps even rather recently, they could very well have been any or all of those things. There was something ripe and immediate about their presence. Something familiar about the sadness in their eyes. It was a sadness that spoke not simply of pain — as if pain could ever be simple — but, also, of defeat and surprise. Yes, surprise; they looked as if they were survivors of a sudden disaster still trying to make sense of what had happened. I stared and I stared for a short while, and then I eventually drove away. Without another thought, another glance, I drove away.

These days, life without anesthesia has become unbearable. I have taken to pouring myself a tall, stiff drink each night before going bed. Which, on some level, is rather senseless because my nights are inviting. I look forward to being able to dream, to creating new settings, new adventures for myself. This is how I escape. It is the days that I often find hard to face. They are so long and predictable. One right after the other, like a steep staircase with no landing in sight. Where will all that climbing take me except farther and farther away from the person I used to be?

There are times when I feel as if my life is being lived only in the past tense, only in stories told at dinner parties or written on paper: I was once a mother who volunteered weekly at her daughter's school; I was once a poet who spent long hours in the park pondering meter and rhyme; I was once a lover who listened, a friend who did more than lunch, a person who would never turn away from someone else's suffering. I was. Once.

I don't know this person that I am becoming. I don't recognize the woman that I am. And what I need right now, what I desperately crave is the comfort of recognition. I think we all do. So we all try to find ways to make that possible; we take our chances and chart our paths to success. But so often, instead of looking inward, we search outside of ourselves. We buy the big house on the hill; we go for the job with the more impressive title, the school with the best reputation; we keep reaching for that shiny apple. Until one day we realize that in our efforts to be seen, we have lost sight of others, even ourselves. We realize that we have fallen. ■

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Bob Gunton.