

The Troupe

by stephen hastings-king

1. B turns over another card on the table. He looks for a while at the cryptic image at its center and then begins to speak.

2. Once there was a traveling theater company. They would arrive in a town some days before a performance was scheduled and gather the rumors, gossip and conversations overheard at public houses that serve as its basis.

One of the actors once told me that long ago they all abandoned their names.

He said: We refer to each other with letters, like variables in equations. Being a letter turns you toward others in the ways that closing your eyes and relaxing your hearing turns you toward sounds.

A performance is a series of situations. Each situation defines the characters that are in it. When the audience sees a character, they see only the situation; the actor playing the part is only a letter, not a name. That makes it easier for them to project onto you whoever they want you to be.

To become a projection requires great discipline.

3. When the actors enter a tavern, some who are there feel like they know some in the troupe; a long-lost friend maybe or someone from the past who hovered in the background, benign but detached, associated with good things but from the edges. Soon each of these actors becomes that person from the edges of the past and each of these townsfolk becomes a person who remembers someone they've always known but never quite. Each applies half-memories to the other like make-up.

While these interactions unfold, other actors become aspects of the situation: listening from a corner; flirting with the bartender; acting interested in the stories of another; a hale fellow well met;

someone drinking to escape a sadness; someone drinking to escape themselves.

Each has hidden an audio recorder that is turned on and off at random. Later, each transcribes what is recorded.

4. Performances are minimalist; bare stage, found lighting. Each setting is an unstable ghostly map of partially imagined towns. Each text is a composition of fragments gathered in the town combined with other materials and actions using chance operations.

Each character is a conjuncture. Each piece moves through counterpoint. Each is built up from phrases and variations. Each treats time-space as music.

5. When the troupe performs, some people come for the entertainment and that is what they hear and see.

Others come to see versions of themselves as they were a day or two ago and to see how the actors cut up and reconfigured their experience. They come to see themselves as they are and as variations at the same time. Performances show them that what happens comes out of possibilities none of which are necessary or inevitable. Sometimes that helps people get free.

Still others see on stage their secrets, but not the secrets that they had told. The secrets on stage emerge from the cutting up and reassembly of what was said. When you conceal something you make it a present absence. You point at it continually through the act of concealing. It is just below the surface. Permutations reveal it. People who conceal things do not like to be reminded of the futility of concealment and still less to see a demonstration presented from a stage.

6. The second night is always full of the whispers that began the night before and the ways they travel through social networks and blossom into conspiracies that center on stopping the performance.

The third night is often cancelled by the people with something to hide.

7. The troupe moves to a different place and the cycle repeats. Even today, the actors make pieces that are connected one to another but each of which is different one from another. Townspeople participate. Audiences come.

The region they travel is small so the troupe passes through the same towns again and again.

But if the performances always cause controversy, you might ask: why do the people welcome the troupe and participate again and again?

Because people like to make stories but they're timid, so they remember people and situations that they do not really remember instead.

And because the performances show people to themselves as they really are, because people like to look at themselves as they really are even though it scares them.

But mostly because every time the people with something to hide act to protect what they're hiding, they give away a little of their power.

8. A says: "Tell me another."

