

## The Library of America • Story of the Week

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# ELIA KAZAN

When Elia Kazan (1909–2003) wrote this wartime piece for *Theatre Arts*—speculating on the G.I. as the cornerstone of a new audience and, incidentally, praising the emergence of Tennessee Williams—he was barely known to the wider public. An Anatolian Greek named Elias Kazanjoglu, he was brought to New York at the age of four. An education at Williams College and the Yale School of Drama led him to acting professionally, and in 1932 he joined the Group Theatre. In a company that included Lee Strasberg, Robert Lewis, and Stella Adler, he was cast chiefly as embattled proles and tough-talking gangsters, most memorably the union organizer Agate Keller in *Waiting for Lefty* and the racketeer Eddie Fuseli in *Golden Boy*. He was also, briefly, a card-carrying Communist, and would later name names before the House Un-American Activities Committee. In 1942 Kazan established himself as a director on Broadway with *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Ahead lay his groundbreaking productions of Arthur Miller (*All My Sons*, 1947; *Death of a Salesman*, 1949) and Williams (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1947; *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, 1955) which set new benchmarks for emotional authenticity in acting; his co-founding in 1947 with Strasberg and Cheryl Crawford of the Actors Studio to foster this new style; his hugely successful career as a Hollywood director; his unhappy leadership of the new Lincoln Center repertory company (1963–65); a belated career as a novelist; and the controversial acceptance of an Honorary Academy Award in 1999.

## *Audience Tomorrow*

### *Preview in New Guinea*

EDDIE MORAN wasn't going with us. He had a bad headache, and his bones ached. Some one suggested Eddie might have a touch of dengue fever, a fantastic disease that gives you the sensation that all your bones are breaking. It developed that he had nothing more exotic than a slight touch of flu, but the talk about dengue furnished a striking contrast to our 'cocktails and dinner downtown' before going to the theatre back in

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New York. We climbed into Captain Lanny Ross' jeep and were off. The sky, for a change, was clear.

The War Department had sent us here to promote the Soldier Show program. With one eye on the fact that a happy soldier is a fighting-working soldier and with the other eye on the post-war period when restless occupation troops will have nothing but time on their hands, the Department was ready to push Soldier Shows. We were here to help set up G.I. production units, to size up the problems of the field, to recommend a program for the other theatres of war. I had thought some about the job at home and on our way over, but I had never anticipated the degree of hunger with which the men craved entertainment, the eagerness with which they offered to participate in programs. If they couldn't act, they'd bring hammers and saws. The theatre can use everybody. All you have to do is scratch around a little in each and every detachment and you are sure to turn up with an eager young man for every function. One has only to light the match—the forest is tinder.

Of course the shows are almost all variety. The favorite G.I. skits and parodies come from their own experiences, and the laughter they generate is all-healthy. Gripes, headaches, complaints and resentments when projected on stage become common property and tend to shrink. You might indulge in self pity on your own behalf, but it is unlikely that you will favor thousands of your mates with the same intensity. In the laughter something potentially dangerous is passed off. It's a simple kind of catharsis, though not, I suppose, what Aristotle meant.

Tonight we were to attend a G.I. Show at the Fifty-first General Hospital. Headquarters was situated on top of a hill which commanded a broad and beautiful valley. As we rode down, jeeps and 'six by six' trucks passed us going up. They were full of soldiers and Wacs, soldiers and Red Cross nurses, soldiers and unidentifiable women. In one of the Headquarters buildings there was an enlisted men's dance. This was social life in New Guinea. It always came to an abrupt close at midnight, when the Wac enlisted personnel had to be in. But now it was seven, the evening was young, and the kids were out 'to have themselves a ball'.

It was growing dark but we were each carrying a little beer, so it was pleasant riding that jeep bare-back through the evening that was closing in. Someone began to sing, and we joined in. You find you sing easily and readily here. And you sing for yourself. You sing to remember something or because you miss something, or because you are reminded of something or because you feel just fine. It's a natural outlet. It helps. Lanny Ross has a good big voice, but even he was singing to himself.

Passing through the gate at the Fifty-first we rode up the side of a hill, cut through the installations of the Hospital, somehow found a rocky half trail, forded a stream and pulled up in the very lobby of the Fifty-first's Theatre: The Medicine Bowl.

In each area there are many recreation halls and 'clubs', but the actual theatres are all out of doors, and all built on the side of hills. The Medicine Bowl was no exception. It was like the Jungle Bowl, the Sugar Bowl and the Iodine Bowl. The men either brought their own seats, chairs or boxes, or there were improvised benches. The Medicine Bowl's stage is set against a background of great trees, which in turn are framed against the mountains of Northern New Guinea. Later the trees would be silhouetted against mountains in flashes of lightning, but now the sky was clear and the night still and empty.

Then came the first shock. In the quiet sat hundreds and hundreds of men, all in pajamas. There are three thousand beds at the Fifty-first General Hospital. Most of them were empty tonight. The men were waiting, spread out around the Bowl. Men wait for hours in New Guinea to see a show. Chow is usually at four-thirty. The shows usually commence at seven. Except for a small officer's section, first come first seats. But that isn't why the men come early, and wait. I can't explain it except by saying that they just want to see the show. They want to bad. They wait with a quiet intensity. There is very little cutting up, shouting back and forth or rowdyism. If you want to see the original hunger for entertainment, come to New Guinea.

They sat in little groups of three and four, clumps of the comradeship the wounded have. These were the men from Leyte and from Luzon. Some had been there for weeks, forty

had come south by plane that very morning. Their pajamas were faded from constant rewashing. Over their shoulders were Australian blankets, tough and durable. The boys in them were the kids from around the block. You kept feeling that you recognized someone. They did not seem like soldiers. Their stance was easy and casual, their smiles shy and fresh, never arrogant or domineering. They were the citizen soldiers of a democracy: tow heads, red heads, Italians, Negroes, Greeks, Irish. The mood was congenial, the night soft, all about was harmony.

Suddenly the two floodlights that, at best, barely illuminated the scene, went out and the single spotlight hit the front curtain. Revealed was a slim dark boy, the Hospital's Special Services officer. I had talked with him a few days ago. Like the other Special Services officers in the Base, he was overburdened with work. In the Army, Special Services is under Service of Supply. Entertainment is supplied to the men as a commodity along with rations, toothbrushes and waterproofing for their shoes. Not really the ideal organization to spur the production of more shows.

It was to be a night of informal entertainment, Lieutenant Braunstein said; in fact he didn't know himself what was in store. Whereupon he introduced Captain Lanny Ross and ducked. You felt that he had done his duty and was only too happy to turn the proceedings over to one of those incomprehensible beings who enjoy standing up before their fellow men. Lanny Ross, let me hasten to assure his friends back home, still has an excellent voice. He has the one first asset: he sings as easily as he talks, eats, or walks. There are men like this—Bing Crosby is the chief—for whom singing is a natural function of the body. Include Lanny . . .

He sang and sang as the boys egged him on. Their applause was a constant command for more. You wondered how he would ever manage to get off stage. When he did, you asked yourself: 'Now what in the world will they do?'

Lanny was saying something about an impromptu show. Suddenly onto the stage dashed three boys in pajamas; one fell at the foot of the mike, the others over him like cards. On their feet they were a strange sight. Two of the three were frightened and embarrassed, but enjoying it. The third boy was in

his element. He was what the boys call 'a character'. Grinning, jittering and bobbing, he finally managed to ask Ross if they could take over for a while. They took over.

What would you expect? What they did was four little skits, each of which kidded the hospital, its staff, their wounds. It was wild! Only if I were Joyce could I hope to communicate the wild glee, the uproar in their hearts, their joy at being alive still, and the insult they paid their wounds. There were many ambulatory cases out front. There were the shell-shocked out front. They roared at themselves. (I remembered with a start of joy that 97% of the wounded in our army recover. All thanks to the New Medicine.)

And now the evening was off. The rest of the show was commonplace as to material, but spirited, too, to the point of abandon. As for the audience, everything was grist to its mill. I'm sure that many of the performers, their heads still ringing with the concussion of that applause, decided then and there that they had found their life work. There was the local Frank Sinatra (his imitators, by the way, outnumbering Crosby's) who did the same trick of suspiration, the faintmaking insinuation of voice that stirs the innards of our national virginhood. . . . There was a shy boy, with glasses, who sang like himself and had barely finished before he had shrunk off stage. There was a magician who was really deft, but seemed even nimbler in the irregular light. I watched the audience.

They were so mercurial. As quick as they were to roar irreverent laughter, just so ready were they to give in to sentiment. The laughter said: 'We're not going to take our wounds seriously; hell no. We're not going to brood over them. Don't pity us. We don't want your sympathy. We don't want to be treated like heroes either. We're ourselves, the same kids; we're normal. Don't forget that!' Then would come a sentimental song and sudden rapt attention and the silence said: 'That's right, talk to me. Talk to me of home and the things I miss, the happy times I knew and will know again—IF I don't get it when I go up north again.' Now they were tender kids, listening, with that look in their eyes that you will remember if you have ever watched children sitting before a show. Wonder is the word, or rapture. There was more; there was rain; but the show went on.

There is hell in the bowels of the weather here, but I have heard of only one audience completely and quickly dispersed, and it wasn't because of the weather. The occasion was the entrance down the centre aisle of a sixteen-foot python. He disappeared under the stage house, and the audience reconvened.

It was really coming down now. Lanny was trying to close the show, asking the boys of the band to put a climax on the evening. I felt he was asking for help. Half of the audience just wouldn't go. As a matter of fact, once the band, a hot six-piece combo, was going you could see many a boy settle as if for the real business of the evening. After the first number they took to calling for their favorites. They just had to hear certain numbers before the rain did its work. There was some community of taste. Duke Ellington's 'Take the A Train' won. Then a piece that was even 'hotter'. The boys were 'teeing off' in dead earnest. The only words seemed to be: 'You take it.' The audience shouted back, 'I got it,' 'You take it,' 'We got it.' The band was improvising. The brass section was battered, so was the music they produced. But always in beat. Each solo was acclaimed. The rain, coming down in horizontal slices, began to cut into the stage opening. Suddenly the boys brought the number to an abrupt close, someone threw a switch and the main lights bumped on. The show was over. In the rain the wounded walked back to their beds.

But that was not all we saw of the audience, or of drama. At the Officers' Club later there was cold Genesee beer. I looked around the club room. Someone had a monkey; they were getting it lively on beer. In a dark corner, a double date: Wacs. In another, two boys were writing. Right next to me, three boys were involved in a serious conversation. I leaned over and listened in. They were discussing the features of the jet plane. The language was highly technical, the faces new to a razor. I had gone through calculus at college—with difficulty, it's true . . . I read *The New York Times*, *PM*, *Life*, *Time*, *The New Yorker*, and all the latest books, but these kids made me feel out of it. Something had passed me by. Folks, there's a new generation.

The one thing these boys want more than anything else is to win the war and to go home. They are citizens, not soldiers. Our army is beautifully organized, beautifully equipped, and

functions with efficiency, power and direction. But the men who run it and the men in the ranks don't impress you as professional soldiers, even when they most certainly are. The officers on Headquarters hill play volley ball each afternoon at five. You have to watch them only five minutes to get the indelible impression that here too are kids from around the block grown up, and nicely too.

You begin to wonder whether America, in getting back to its pursuit of happiness, won't run the danger of cancelling out this entire experience as a 'Bad Deal'. Significantly the one thing the boys will take home with them is an idealization of the 'States'. The States can't hope to live up to the picture these boys have in their mind's eye. These twelve million men are potentially the greatest unified body of Public Opinion our country has ever known. They could, if brought together, insist that an organization be found and made to function that would never permit a repetition and intensification of this nightmare.

I was sitting by myself, thinking of these things as I scraped the mud off those monuments to indestructibility, the G.I. shoe. It was time to go home. At first the road was through the jungle. We sloshed along, lurching here and there, over tree roots, till we hit the main highway. The jeep seemed pleased, spun up the hill. We drove through a cloud and out. And in a moment we were out of the rain. But the threat was still there, and later that night the rain picked up and came down in sheets almost horizontal, accelerating and accelerating till you felt it must soon reach some kind of breaking point, then slowing down suddenly as if to gain momentum. I lay in my bed thinking of home for the first time since my arrival. Thus I became one with the thousands of men over here. And that night I dreamt of home.

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Coming back, I feel that the audience is ahead of us. We, the makers of entertainment, are faced with the job. We must try, in our field, to be as honest and grown-up as these kids. It is not a matter of chance any longer. The fellows who come back will be demanding. We'll have to be good to survive. If we're not, we'll feel our failure where it really hurts: at the box-office.

Those boys just won't pay a dollar plus for some of the celluloid I've seen. They're a lot tougher, more honest, and a lot more progressive.

It is encouraging to return and find Tennessee Williams' fine play, *The Glass Menagerie*, the reigning dramatic hit on Broadway. It's the kind of thing that wise and experienced showmen have always said didn't have a chance. I have often felt that the more experienced the showman is, the further behind the audience he is liable to be. Let's stop worrying about how intelligent the audience is. Let's think a little, we who make the stuff, about how good we can be. Because it is we who are challenged. We're behind. We're on the spot. Everyone is worried in Hollywood about the coming recession at the box-office. There's one way to avoid it. That is to make what is in the theatres a live experience for the people, not merely a kill-time. All the people of this nation have grown some during the war. Twelve million men have grown a lot. Some of us may not know it, but we are being challenged!