

Stolen Selves

By David Hlavsa

Despite their streetwise language and recognizable urban settings, Lyle Kessler's plays are neither prosaic nor conventionally realistic. In Kessler's world, standard psychology does not apply. The self is not a permanent entity; characters don and shed selves as quickly and easily as coveralls. Events have a magical, even mystical quality. As in fairy tales, a brutal and myopic older generation of ogres stalks the landscape. But Kessler's naive, damaged and abandoned younger generation is not doomed by its heritage. His protagonists eventually grow and become stronger. They overcome their frailties, reject the mistakes of their elders, and claim an emotional territory for themselves. They stake their claim on identity.

"Mainly, I'm interested in shifting identities," says Kessler. "What is the self? What is the personality? What are the masks?"

Though *Robbers* and Kessler's best-known play, *Orphans*, are not based on actual incidents, Kessler calls them "emotionally autobiographical." Like myths or fairy tales, his plays are built around metaphors of emotional need. "The closer I get to unresolved feelings within myself," he says, "the stronger the material is."

Several years ago, Kessler joined the Imagination Workshop, a group (founded by his wife, actress Margaret Ladd) of professional writers and actors who work with hospitalized psychiatric patients. Through guided, structured improvisations, often centering on fairy tale themes, the patients (some of whom are diagnosed as incapable of functioning on any level) are able to create their own plays.

Though the members of the Workshop do not see themselves as therapists as such, the results of their work have astounded hospital workers and psychiatrists. "The patients are frozen into these sick, limited selves that stop them from functioning," says Kessler. "We give them the

clothes of a magician or of a race car driver. These people, some of whom are diagnosed as incapable of functioning on any level, create their own plays."

A very repressed patient sitting with his arms folded suddenly, without even thinking, will begin to behave with the energy and power of a race car driver. "He doesn't know he's not supposed to," says Kessler. "Suddenly he's able to express desires and needs and fears that he could not as himself."

"Many people are cut off from their real feelings. Maybe that's why they go to the theatre, to see people expressing feelings they can't," Kessler observes. "There are a lot of actors who can hide behind a mask and do things that they wouldn't ever do as themselves."

"Sometimes a mask can be a good thing. In order to get out in the world sometimes you, I, anyone has to have one. It's a kind of armor. It's only when the armor calcifies and becomes part of you that it becomes a bad thing."

"You gotta build up existential muscles in order to survive," continues Kessler. "That's what *Robbers* is about: surviving in this world where people are picking at you and stealing pieces of you. In the world of commerce and communications, one has to know how to navigate through this world of sharks and not become a shark oneself."

Asked if he's ever been robbed, Kessler laughs. "Not of money," he says. "They tried to in New York, but I wouldn't give it to them. No, I've never been robbed. You know, it's funny, the patients have been robbed. These people, it seems as if they've been robbed of who they are."

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