

It all went wrong in Bernardi's rehearsal

When Herschel Bernardi walked onto the Ford Auditorium stage for rehearsal for "The Hassidic Happening," nothing earthshaking happened.

Bernardi, sporting a greying beard and wearing an army fatigue cap pulled down over his eyes, bore little resemblance to any publicity pictures I had seen, and since I was engrossed in my duties as the show's producer, I didn't even recognize the star as he stroled in my direction.

We had had a telephone conversation several days earlier when Bernardi had informed me of his increasing fatigue. It forced him to curtail all press-publicity commitments except those which he could do in his hotel room.

Although Bernardi inherited a theatrical birthright from his parents who were stars of the Yiddish theater, he has found his greatest success within the last 20 years.

Having passed the half century of life several years ago, Bernardi has been pulled by an undertow of engagements.

His television role as Arnie, his Broadway roles in "Bajour," "Man of La Mancha" and "Fiddler on the Roof" all contributed to the tidal wave.

Things began to happen at Ford Auditorium the moment he picked up the rented cordless lavaliere microphone.

Bernardi's rich, booming voice resounded but was backed by an annoying sound like rushing wind. The



Jocelyn Krieger

cupric attached to his tie refused to function correctly.

While I attempted to locate another mike, Bernardi lunged into rehearsal. Swiftly, he placed his array of props on the 8-foot table — a golden sword and silver helmet with pieces of wispy hair for mustache. Presto! Bernardi would become "Man of La Mancha."

Add ritual fringes and black cap, add a bit of makeup — *Voilà!* Bernardi would be Tevye singing "If I Were a Rich Man."

Elliott Finkel, Bernardi's impressive piano accompanist, has unbelievable stamina. For two hours he remained at attention before the keyboard. A mild-mannered young man, Finkel is a concert pianist and entitled to his own share of applause.

REHEARSAL FOR Bernardi isn't a fast talk-through. Each story is told and every song sung exactly as in performance.

Most of Bernardi's attention during rehearsal is focused on the lighting.

"What is your name, please?" Bernardi called to the man in the light booth and repeated the question to the man off-stage at the light board.

The question is the key to Bernardi. He believes everyone has a name and he meticulously uses that name, personalizing all of his business dealings. Bernardi also wants people to use his first name.

Lights were of major importance to Bernardi for another reason.

Six weeks earlier he fell from the stage in Minneapolis when a light man missed a cue. Ignoring the mishap, he finished the show and made second curtain calls in the emergency room of a nearby hospital where he was treated for a broken elbow.

The Minneapolis performance had been the beginning of his tour for the Chabad-Lubavitch, a Jewish education organization. Bernardi performed the following weeks in tremendous pain.

WHEN BERNARDI learned it would be impossible to locate another cordless mike, he agreed to work with the lavaliere mike which clipped on but involved a long, thin cord. He wanted to dance, but the cord ensnared his feet.

"Guess I'll just use it in the act," he decided. "I might as well joke about it since I'm going to have to carry it around all evening. I think I'll call it my 'shepperness' (a drag around)."

Having finished his finale, a weary Bernardi trudged to the Green Room where I had promised him a hot cup of Sanka.

"I don't understand what anyone is asking me or saying to me," Bernardi sighed as he sank into a

comfortable chair. "I'm so tired, everything sounds the same."

One hour later, 30 minutes before curtain time, a refreshed, relaxed Bernardi passed me on stage.

"How's everything going?" he grinned.

"Great," I lied.

I wasn't about to disturb him with details, but while he was resting, Ford's crew had misplaced the turntable needed to play the recorded opening scene music. They found it only moments before Bernardi asked the leading question.

For a bonus, the lead guitar in our Israeli orchestra had blown an amplifier and I was nervously waiting for another from a local band leader and friend, Eric Roseman.

"The Hassidic Happening eventually did happen. For a surprise finale, Irving Laker, concert chairman, presented Bernardi an engraved plaque on behalf of Lubavitch, citing Bernardi for his contribution of happiness for all people.

He showed his appreciation by joining a group of black-coated, bearded rabbis dancing center stage, swirling about with amazing energy to the delight of the sold-out house.

Temperament? Theatrics? Those aren't for Herschel Bernardi. He's a celebrity who never forgets his roots.

Jocelyn Krieger is a free-lance writer and a former actress in off-Broadway productions. As a singer, she has appeared with the Detroit Concert Band and Detroit Symphony Orchestra.



Bernardi

Is it safe to pick up hitchhiker from Vermont?

A tall, nice-looking, well-dressed man was standing in Orchard Lake Road outside of the West Bloomfield library. He had a book under his left arm, and his right thumb was waving for a ride.

He did not appear to be a typical hitchhiker, and it seemed highly unlikely someone with harmful intentions would use this setting as a play. As I passed him, I felt the apprehensions drivers feel about picking up riders.

I queried the guilt about my mistrust, rationalizing that by picking up any hitchhiker I could be exposing myself to potential danger.

I'll never know if his car was stuck in the library parking lot, if he had a hard time paying overdue book fines, or if he was a member of a mobile book club.

Of course, if I had picked him up, I would have found out. I learned as a youngster that a hitchhiker is subject to a driver's interrogation.

During those long trips to our summer house, picking up a rider was a pleasant diversion. My father had a weakness for anyone standing on the side



Sheila Rosen Seitzman

of the road holding up a sign that said "VERMONT."

I REMEMBER one young man in an army uniform who was going home on leave for the weekend to visit his girlfriend. All he wanted to do was go to sleep.

All my father wanted to do was to convince him to marry the girl back home. I think before he died off he said he would.

As a precocious pre-teen I was delighted that the guest was sitting next to me. I recall staring at his peaceful face, watching it as it was occasionally highlighted by passing headlights and thinking, "He may be going home to you, but look who he's sleeping next to now!"

When we pass hitchhikers on the road, our children ask us why we don't pick them up. We share with them the fears of our times, of being assaulted, robbed or kidnaped.

But I've also told them about the people Grandpa gave rides to when I was growing up, and they want to know why he wasn't afraid. It's difficult to explain that 25 years ago people trusted each other more and that just the magic of the word "Vermont" could make my father sure no harm would come to us.

LAST SUMMER, in Vermont, I wanted to share this type of experience with our children. My husband and I had discussed picking up a hitchhiker, and every time we saw a thumb out on the road, we

realized we were shopping for the right rider.

Early one evening on the way to a small town fair, we saw a young woman with a duffel bag jump out of a cab of a truck. As her ride drove off, she barely had enough time to put out her thumb when we picked her up.

During our interrogation, we found out that she was a college-bound student from Connecticut who was on her way to visit her brother. He was an actor in a summer stock theater group in the same town where we were headed.

I wonder now: If we were to pick up that same girl on Orchard Lake Road, would the word "Vermont" still assure our safety?

The writer, a resident of Orchard Lake, is a speech pathologist and has worked in public schools, hospitals and rehabilitation clinics and has had a private practice. She is the mother of three daughters and is married to a patent attorney. This concludes her 13-week series.

1980 by Sheila Seitzman.

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