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A Hidden Gem in the Little Theater

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16 October 2017

The paint chipped slowly at first and my muses peered through the cracked blinds. The excavator was Dan Jacobs. He was persistent against the hardened sediment that blinded the world from the treasure beneath. As the paint was scraped away and my muses place under the intense spotlights was restored, I heard my name in the echoes. My legacy, left behind long ago, was picked up, refurbished and returned to its rightful position, center stage. My name, cast away to the University's archives, now recognized in the community. My art was revived and I was set free. At this moment, I experienced the joys of returning to glory. This journey started with a creation and culminated with the disappointment of rejection.

It was 1929 when this saga began. I was an art professor at the University of Denver. Beyond my hours of teaching, I was commissioned to revamp an otherwise dreary room. Tucked away in the back of Margery Reed Hall sat the Little Theater. Beyond the settled dust, the potential glimmered. The voices that grabbed my attention were those of the originals. The pioneers of theater. The father of theater was Shakespeare. No better inspiration for our future characters than the ones who came before them. It was settled. Romeo, Juliet, Lady Macbeth and their Shakespearean counterparts would find their home on the arch that framed the stage.

The creation phase began. First, I carefully constructed the plans. I had to be wise with my placement of every detail. The position of the star-crossed lovers needed to rightfully convey the odyssey of heart-ache. As an artist, I knew that if my art didn't make me feel something, the result would be the same for my audience. I painted long hours late into the night. I stretched up the wall and hung down the ladder. No detail could be forgotten. By December of 1929, my masterpiece was finished. When I was done, I stepped back and felt the powerful presence of the originals.

Next came the loss. January 27, 1931. This day sits poignant in my memory. I was sitting with the director of the Denver Art Museum, Arnold Rönnebeck, enjoying a nice lunch. The January air was crisp, but the warm food left us comfortable on the patio. As I felt my piping hot soup drain down my throat, I noticed a student of mine rushing towards me. His face screamed tragedy. Catching his breath, he stuttered, “professor... the theater...your painting ...destroyed.” First I felt confused, I excused myself from the table, and I rushed down the trail my student had just blazed.

When I entered the Little Theater, all I saw was black. The black interior crept from the walls invading the ground beneath my feet, occupying the ceiling above me and breaching the light of day beyond the windows. The soup from lunch may have burned my throat, but the view in front of me left my blood boiling. Walter Sinclair, the man behind the horrors. The name tasted like tar in my mouth. As the new director of the theater he took it upon himself to make his vision for the program known. I found that man and I gave him a piece of my mind, but his actions had already robbed me. I didn’t want an apology. I wanted him to pull back on the hands of father time and turn back the hour. I wanted him to undue his artless mistake.

The anger I felt in those moments filled me with sadness. I could not imagine my capacity to hold anymore. Then, Sinclair opened his mouth. His explanation held no sorrow. To him it was simple: Shakespeare was outdated. My fury breached the unimaginable. “Out of date.” My world went spinning. First came the yelling. I hollered like a warrior, fighting for a territory overstepped by an enemy. I saw no remorse. He was blind to any vision. “The black-box is experimental. I am looking towards the future.” The words dropped from his mouth hard and disjointed, just like the gunk he plastered on the walls. I struggled to understand what bright future he saw when he was left standing in the dark.

His arrogance left me with a stark realization: I now knew why some men, otherwise law-abiding, sometimes commit murder. The rage I felt was shared amongst many of my colleagues. Many University Board members resigned in protest. The reality was still unaltered. The anger became quieter and quieter. It almost disappeared. It is hard to understand the importance of being remembered, until you become forgotten. And yet, my helplessness left me stuck on the words of my late muse, Lady Macbeth, “What’s done cannot be undone.”

Following loss came 80 years of waiting. A good captain goes down with his ship. As a passionate artist, I remained stuck with my legacy, in life and death. Now came the return to glory. In 2007 Dan Jacobs was hired as the new director and curator for the Myhren Gallery, my old stomping grounds. Since my time at the university many have come and gone. Jacobs was different. He didn’t fit the director mold. The term was too cold to define him. The more romantic “keeper” better described him. He was a keeper of art. All good keepers understand the importance of inventory. They must understand what it is they are keeping. A good knowledge of a places artistic history is imperative. Jacob’s research revealed a lost name in the history books. Mine, placed right below the original photograph of my Shakespearean setting. He ran to the Little Theater as I had the day of loss. Shock consumed him, just the same, as the dark room consumed his glow. Where I saw a helpless black wall, he saw the weathering effect that 80 years had on cheap black paint. This realization set a ball in motion that couldn’t be stopped. He compiled a team, he raised funds, and he began an uphill battle.

His team approached the wall timidly at first. Attention to detail became non-negotiable. He understood the importance of a balanced solvent to scraping ratio. It had to be harsh enough to remove 80 years of buildup, yet soft enough to save the legacy that deserved to shine under the spot lights. The reward increments were slow to come, but nevertheless, they persisted.

Multiple days of hard work would show but a single square foot of the masterpiece below. And yet, one square foot turned to two, two turned to four, and so on. Every inch revealed a new muse to carry them through. The finish was genius. The vision too long forgotten, has now received a standing ovation.