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RAY BRADBURY'S

The Veldt

the dramatic publishing company

*** NOTICE ***

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INTRODUCTION
With Notes on Staging

First things first. This book is dedicated to Charles Rome Smith, who has directed all of my work for the theater so far, and who will, God allowing, direct more in the years ahead.

As for myself, I began with the theater and I shall probably end with it. I have not, up to now, made a penny, nickel or dime at it, but my love is constant and, in best cliché fashion, its own reward. It has to be. For no one stands about in the alleys after a show giving doughnut money to crazy playwrights.

My first dream in life was to become a magician. Blackstone summoned me up on stage when I was ten to help him with various illusions. I assisted in vanishing a bird in its cage, and helped stir a rabbit out of a strange omelet. Blackstone gave me the rabbit, which I carried home in happy hysterics. Named Tillie, the rabbit in short order produced six more rabbits and I was off and running as an illusionist.

At twelve I was singing leads in school operettas. At twelve and one-half, in Tucson, Arizona, I announced to my classmates that within two weeks I would be an actor broadcasting from local Radio Station KGAR. Self-propelled by my own infernal brass, I trotted over to the station, hung about emptying ashtrays, running for cokes,

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and being happily underfoot. Rather than drown me with a batch of kittens, the station gave up and hired me to read the Sunday comics to the kiddies every Saturday night. My pay was free tickets to the local theaters to see *The Mummy* and *King Kong.* I was undoubtedly overpaid.

In high school I wrote the Annual Student Talent Show. At nineteen I belonged to Laraine Day's Wilshire Players Guild in a Mormon Church only a block from my home in Los Angeles. For Laraine, who was becoming a big star at MGM in those days in such films as *My Son, My Son,* I wrote a number of three-act plays that were so incredibly bad no one in the Guild dared tell me of my absolute lack of talent.

Nevertheless, I sensed my own mediocrity and quit playwriting. I vowed never to return to the theater for twenty years, until I had seen and read most of the plays of our time. I lived up to that vow. Only in my late thirties, with thousands of seen performances in my blood, did I dare to try my hand at theater work again.

Even then, licking my old wounds, I feared to let my plays fall into the hands of directors and actors. I seriously doubted my ability, and probably would have delayed additional years had not a friend, hearing of my one-act Irish plays, invited me over to his house one night for a reading. My work was read aloud by actors James Whitmore and Strother Martin. By the end of the evening, we were all on the floor, laughing. Suddenly I realized that the older Bradbury was at long last ready for the theater again.

The theater, however, was not ready for me. I could find no group, no director, no actor, no banker, prepared to put my plays on a stage.

Only in 1963, when Charles Rome Smith and I fell into each others arms, did I begin to think of producing the plays, myself.

Now this, in itself, is extraordinary. In the entire history of the American theater, only a handful of playwrights have been brash enough, and dumb enough, to save their money and invest it in their own plays.

I talked it over with my wife, told her I thought the plays were more than good, that all the producers were wrong, as well as the bankers, and that I had to try, just once, to see whether or not I was the grandest fool of all.

We saved our money for a year, rented the Coronet Theatre in Los Angeles, finished three one-act plays, hired Charles Rome Smith to direct, and began casting.

The evening of one acts titled *The World of Ray Bradbury,* opened in October, 1964. The reviews were all, I repeat all, excellent. If I had written them myself they couldn't have been better.

The World ran twenty weeks, after which we opened *The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit* for a run of twenty-four weeks, again to incredibly fine notices.

We took *The World of Ray Bradbury* to New York in 1965 where, with inferior casting and a dreary theater in a bad section of the Bowery, plus a newspaper strike which insured our nonexixtence, we folded within three nights, to the tune of $40,000 and thirty-five belated and truly bad reviews, published after our closing, when the newspapers rushed back on the scene to give us a dark burial.

I took the slow train home, vowing to stay away from New York for another lifetime. So far, producers and directors in New York appear to feel the same way; I have not been invited East since.

What did I learn from these experiences? That working with your own group, your own theater, your own director, your own actors, your own money, is best.

Working with an outside producer and outside money, one is constantly victimized by worries over losing their investment or toadying to their taste and will. Working as your own producer, all the fun that *should* be in the theater comes to the surface. I have rarely had such a glorious time in my life. I dearly loved being with my actors and my director. I enjoyed the challenge of casting. I wrote most of the publicity for the theater myself, helped design the advertising, clean out the restrooms, and, finally, take the losses without a sigh or remorseful tear. Strange to report, losing one's own money doesn't hurt at all. Losing other people's money is, for me, anyway, a dreadful experience, one I hope to suffer rarely in a lifetime.

What else did I learn? To trust my own intuitive judgment and taste. Let me give you an example:

My director called me in the midst of rehearsals of *To the Chicago Abyss.* The actors, he cried, are in rebellion. The play won't work they say. Chaos. Tell everyone to hold still, sit down, I'll be right there, I said. I grabbed a taxi and made it to the theater in ten minutes. Okay, I said, everyone on stage, run through the play!

The actors, grumbling, did the play. When it was over I gave one hell of a yell. Good grief, you're terrific! I said. You know what's wrong with you? You're all exhausted. You've been in rehearsal four weeks and you don't know which end is up. Let me tell you: this play is the best play of the three we're putting on. It's the play that will get the best notices. In this play, *you* will get the critical shouts of joy.

I was right of course, and my actors were wrong. The day after our opening, the reviews mentioned *To the Chicago Abyss* above all the other plays. Harold Gould, our principal actor, got raves for his performance as the Old Man Who Remembered Mediocrities.

I guess what I'm saying here is, if you don't have taste, if you don't trust your intuition, if you don't believe in your plays and their ideas to start with, you shouldn't be in the theater. But if you do make the move, make it on your own, save up your money, it doesn't have to be a large amount, rent a warehouse, nail together a ramshackle stage, and do the damned play! I have spent as little as $49.50 producing one of my plays at a storefront theater in Los Angeles. At other times I have spent $200 and then again $20,000, which went into our final production of *The World of R.B.*

For what other reasons did I come back to the theater after almost twenty years away? Because most of the plays I saw or read in those twenty years had no ideas in them. Because most of the plays I saw or read had no language, no poetry in them. I could not then, I cannot now, accept a theater that is devoid of ideas and poetry. It seemed shocking to me that a country that has been built on ideas, both political and technological, a country that has influenced the entire world with its concepts and three-dimensional extrusions of those concepts in robot forms, would be so singularly lacking in the theater of ideas.

I have always thought that Bernard Shaw deserved to be the patron saint of the American theater. Yet I saw little of his influence here, a true playwright of ideas born to set the world right. Avant-garde in 1900, he remains light years ahead of our entire avant-garde today.

My other saint would be Shakespeare, of course; and I saw none of his best influence at work in our theater arts.

They say that novelists write the books they wish they could find in libraries.

I set out to write the plays I did not see on the American stage. Shaw? No. Shakespeare? Hardly. Yet if one's influences are not great and broad and wondrous, one has nowhere to start and nowhere to go. These find ghosts were my instructors, my good company, my friends.

I rediscovered them through Charles Laughton. In 1955, Charles Laughton and Paul Gregory asked me to adapt my novel *Fahrenheit 451* to the stage. I came up with a bad play. Laughton and Gregory gave me drinks one night at sunset and told me just how bad, but told me kindly. A few months later, Charlie had me up to his house. He stood on his hearth and began to talk about theater, about Molière, about the Restoration playwrights, but particularly about Shaw and then Shakespeare.

As he talked, his house filled with pageantry. The flagstones of his fireplace knew the print of horses and the cry of mobs. The theater of Shakespeare pulsed out of Charlie with great clarity and beauty. He taught me about language all over again.

In the following years I would often go over to swim on summer afternoons when Charlie was preparing to direct or appear in *Major Barbara, The Apple Cart,* or, at Stratford-on-Avon, *King Lear.* Charlie would float enormously about his pool, glad for my company, for I was silent, and he loved to talk theater and work out his ideas on character and style on anyone who had the good sense to listen.

It was the best school I ever had, and the best teacher. I have not forgotten dear Charles Laughton's lessons. Anything of mine you see on stage in the coming years will be touched by Charlie's presence. And, just at his elbow, Blackstone.

Their shared theater magic is very similar. What Laughton accomplished with language, Blackstone accomplished with conniption-fit machineries and illusory contraptions.

The two come together and fuse in my science-fiction plays *The Veldt* and *To the Chicago Abyss.*

Science fiction is what happened to magic when it passed through the hands of the alchemists and became future history. Somewhere along the line we changed caps, labels, and became more practical, but the effect is the same. Television is no less magical for being capable of explanation. I still don't believe it works. Airplanes don't fly; the laws are all wrong.

Our modern technologies, then, are the equivalents of old astrological frauds, alchemical lies, and the nightmares of pre- history. We must build the old terrors up in metal forms and steam them to stranger destinations, first in our psyches, and very soon after in three dimensions, two of which are more often than not surprise and horror. The third is, of course, delight. We wouldn't build these immense toys if we didn't dearly love to wind them up and let them run to Doom's End or Eternal Life, sometimes one, sometimes t'other.

I wrote *The Veldt* because my subconscious knew more about children than has often been told. It began as a word-association test, the sort of thing I often do mornings when I go from bed to my typewriter and let anything jump out on the page that wishes to jump. I wrote the

word "nursery" on a piece of paper. I thought to myself, Past? No, Present? No, Future? Yes! A nursery in the future, what would it be like? Two hours later the lions were feeding on the far veldt in the last light of day, the work was done, I wrote *Finis* and stopped.

To the Chicago Abyss was written because sociologists, amateur and professional psychologists, and grand intellectual thinkers bore, distract, or irritate me to madness. I do not believe, and never have believed, that mediocrities hurt people. I have loved all the mass media, looked down on by the intelligentsia, as I grew up. I wanted to do a play about a man who could not recall great quality but only quantity, and that of such dumb stuffs as to be beneath consideration. The boy in me remembered Clark Bars and their bright circus wrappings, and I was off!

To the Chicago Abyss was written long years before Pop Art came on the scene. The story and the play proved to be more than a little prophetic. Since that time, also, motion pictures, once disdained, have been discovered to be an art form. Where was everyone forty years ago? How come I knew it when I was ten? *To the Chicago Abyss* says: Enjoy! If we took all of the junk out of life, our juices would dry up, the sap would go dead in the trees, we would occupy an intellectual graveyard and read each other's headstones.

The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit came out of my experiences as a child and young man in Roswell, New Mexico, Tucson, Arizona, and Los Angeles. I grew up with many boys of mixed Mexican-American blood. My best friend at junior high school was a boy named Eddie Barrera. When I was twenty-one I lived in and around a tenement at the corner of Figueroa Street and Temple in L.A., where, for five years, I saw my friends coming and going

from Mexico City, Laredo, and Juarez. Their poverty and mine were identical. I knew what a suit could mean to them. I saw them share clothes, as I did with my father and brother. I remembered graduating from Los Angeles High School wearing a hand-me-down suit in which one of my uncles had been killed by a holdup man. There was a bullet hole in the front and one going out the back of the suit. My family was on government relief when I graduated. What else, then, but wear the suit, bullet holes and all?

So much for the genesis of these plays. Now, how does one produce them? As simply as possible.

Let the Shakespearean and Oriental theater teach you. Little scenery, few props, and an immense enthusiasm for myth, metaphor, language to win the day.

In a science-fiction play, the harder you try to create the world of the future, the worse your failure. Simplicity was the keynote for our sets and costumes. In *The Veldt,* the various living areas of the future house were defined by nothing more than complex geometric patterns of bright nylon and other synthetic threads. The house looked very much like a fragile tapestry works. You could easily see through all the walls. The main door leading into the playroom-nursery was a spider-web like device which could expand or contract when pulled or released by other bright twines. Another minor psychological factor might be mentioned here: your average scrim, utilized in thousands of plays over the years, comes between your actors and the audience as an irritating obstruction. Our use of bright threads and twines was a good discovery. The audience never felt kept off, away, or obstructed, yet the feeling of a wall was there when we needed it.

When I first wrote *The Veldt* as a play, I had intended to project actual films of lions on a vast screen. This would have been an error of such immensity I can hardly believe I once entertained the idea.

Instead, I fell back on the lessons so amiably taught me by friend Laughton: stand in the center of the stage and create with words that world, these concepts, those carnivorous beasts.

The audience, then, was to become the veldt, and the sun-blazed lions. When in the playroom, my actors stared out and around in the wilderness that the audience became. This approach worked splendidly.

It worked also because we used sound tapes broadcast from the four corners of the auditorium. This allowed us to prowl the lion roars in circles around about and behind the audience, always keeping them a bit off-balance, never knowing where the sound of the lions might rise again in the grass.

So I rediscovered an ancient fact. A well-written, well-spoken line creates more images than all the movies of the world. The Chinese were wrong. One word is worth a thousand pictures.

There are more than forty-two sound cues in *The Veldt,* and as many or more light cues.

This means you must find a stage manager, a lighting man, and a sound man of absolutely sterling quality, not liable to panics. The slightest error can throw *The Veldt* off-balance, drive the actors out of their minds, and send the director off to the nearest pub for the rest of the night.

Therefore, the technical rehearsals on *The Veldt* must be exhausting. This means staying up long after midnight in the final days before your opening to make sure that

sound, light, and actors function as one whole. Your actors must sense each sound and light cue with hairline accuracy, so as to be able to relax and react truly to Africa "out beyond," hidden among the paying customers.

Every community has its hi-fi superconcussive sound nut. Find yours. Hire him. How? Lurk around your local woofer-tweeter outlet store. The guy with his hair standing on end, with a blind gaze and a bottle of ear medicine in his hand, is the expert at weird auditory hallucinations. Put up with him. Trust him. He will gladly run you up a sound tape of electronic moans, groans, and future musics as will fill the bill for *The Veldt,* and *To the Chicago Abyss!* Ignore the fact that he belongs to a motorcycle gang and is an astrology freak. You can't have everything. Right now, the world of the future can be juiced into existence by superkinks such as he. I have had three tapes invented by a variety of unwashed technicians. All have been amazing. All have been of fine good use in providing yet one more element for our future plays.

In putting together a sound tape for *The Veldt,* your technician should be the next thing to an electronic composer. The scene where George commands the playroom to build him Egypt, the Pyramids, the Sphinx, Paris at the blue hour, etc., must be electronically orchestrated so we *hear* those things being reared up out of the earth into the sky, surrounding the audience with the sounds of electric creation.

Of course, if you are in high school or junior high school, lacking the hi-fi freak in the student body, search for some faculty member whose wig is permanently frazzled from too many hi's and not enough bass. Every school has one. Flatter him by asking for his help. And when in doubt, simplicity is the answer here, also. A few

bits of electronic sound and some really good lion roars will save *The Veldt.*

We have spoken at length about *The Veldt.* Now, let us move on to *To the Chicago Abyss* and *The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit.*

In both of these plays we used magic lantern projections, immense photographic cels tossed up on scrims behind the actors to indicate changes of scene.

My good friend Joe Mugnaini, who has illustrated many of my books during the last nineteen years, painted a series of futuristic sets which we projected in images roughly ten to fifteen feet tall, enabling us to shift scenes, change locales, in two or three seconds flat. The six young men pursuing life in their Ice Cream Suit were thus able to race from street to suit emporium to apartment to Red Rooster Cafe with no long mood-shattering pauses for set-movers to strike and rebuild.

Similarly, in *To the Chicago Abyss,* my Old Man who remembered mediocrities could amble from park to interior apartment to night train, crossing empty midnight country in the merest breath of time, because of our illustrated projections.

Joe Mugnaini painted us the whole interior apartment house in skeletal outline so one could x-ray up through floor levels at hundred of rooms, empty of furniture, haunted by lonely people. At the play's finale, he painted a cel on which were lumped and crammed the crowds of sleeping shadow people surrounding the Old Man on the late-night passenger train.

The inhabitants of the Ice Cream Suit live in a needed world of fantasy woven for them by the suit. The Old Man on his way to Chicago Abyss lives in his memories. Projected backgrounds, then, add yet another proper,

right element to the people in these plays, immersed in dreams or half-dreams.

A minor but important detail. The scene in the Red Rooster Cafe where Toro grabs the Ice Cream Suit with Vamenos inside it must be played in SLOW MOTION, as indicated. This was an idea of Charles Rome Smith's which came to him during rehearsals. It proved to be beautiful in execution, enabling the audience to savor every small part of this major encounter, the terror and despair of all the young men surrounding Toro, trying to get him to let go of the suit, the bravery of Gomez coming back again and again to say 'Hit me, not him,' and being clouted for his trouble. All, all in the slowest motion, so we can see and hear every special instant up to the beautiful moment when Toro, struck on the head, slowly debates whether to accept unconsciousness, then, like an avalanche, subsides to the floor.

You are not going to be able to find six actors all with the same "skeletons" as Gomez puts it. So I dread to tell you the news, but you must have three or four or perhaps even five suits made and ready for the members of your cast, for the proper fit, and for the quick changes demanded by the scenes. *We* had five suits, which had to be cleaned two or three times a week. Luckily, our cleaner liked the play, and gave us rates!

Here, then, are the first three plays I wrote for my Pandemonium Theatre Company. Why such a company name? Because it pleased and delighted me. Because it was an unexpected and frivolous name to give a company of glad fools. And because it meant when you came into our theater, you never knew what special kind of hell might break loose.

Now...
Let the lions run.
Let the old man talk.
The Pandemonium Theatre Company,
from here on, is yours.

Ray Bradbury
Los Angeles
August 22, 1971

THE VELDT

A Play in One Act
For Three Men, One Woman, One Boy and One Girl

CHARACTERS

GEORGE HADLEY ..... thirty-six-year-old salesman
ELECTRICIAN ..... typical workman
LYDIA HADLEY .... George's thirty-two-year-old wife
PETER HADLEY ..... twelve-year-old boy
WENDY HADLEY ..... thirteen-year-old girl
DAVID MACLEAN .....psychiatrist

TIME: Near Future

THE VELDT

The curtain rises to find a completely empty room with no furniture of any kind in it. This room encompasses the entire front half of the stage. Its walls are scrim which appear when lighted from the front, vanish when lighted from the rear. In the center of the room is a door which leads to the living quarters of a house circa 1991. The living quarters dominate the entire rear half of the stage. There we see armchairs, lamps, a dining table and chairs, some abstract paintings. When the characters in the play are moving about the living area, the lights in the "empty" room, the playroom, will be out, and we will be able to see through into the back quarters of the house. Similarly, when the characters enter the empty playroom, the lights will vanish in the living room and come on, in varying degrees, as commanded, in the play area.

At rise of curtain, the playroom is dimly lit. An electrician, bent to the floor, is working by flashlight, fingering and testing electrical equipment set under a trapdoor. From above and all around come ultrahigh-frequency hummings and squealings, as volume and tone are adjusted.

GEORGE HADLEY, about thirty-six, enters and moves through the living area to look through the playroom door. He is fascinated, delighted in fact, by the sounds and the flicker of shadows in the playroom. He looks out through the fourth wall, as he will do often in the play, and treats the audience area, on all sides, as if it were the larger part of the playroom. Much lighting, and vast quantities of sound, will come from the sides and back of the theater itself. At last excited, GEORGE turns and calls.

GEORGE. Lydia! Lydia, come here!

(She appears, a woman about thirty-two, very clean and fresh, dressed simply but expensively for a housewife.)

GEORGE *(waving)*. Come on! It's almost ready!

(She joins him at the door as the humming, squealing dies. The ELECTRICIAN slams the trapdoor, rises, and comes toward them with his kit.)

THE ELECTRICIAN. It's all yours, Mr. Hadley.
GEORGE. Thanks, Tom.

(THE ELECTRICIAN turns to point a screwdriver into the room.)

ELECTRICIAN. There's your new-- how does the advertisement read? Happylife Electrodynamic Playroom! And *what* a room!
LYDIA *(ruefully)*. It ought to be. It cost thirty thousand dollars.

GEORGE *(taking her arm)*. You'll forget the cost when you see what the room can do.
ELECTRICIAN. You sure you know how to work it?
GEORGE. You taught me well!
ELECTRICIAN. I'll run on, then. Wear it in health! *(Exits.)*
GEORGE. Good-bye, Tom.

(GEORGE turns to find LYDIA staring into the room.)

GEORGE. Well!
LYDIA. Well...
GEORGE. Let me call the children!

(He steps back to call down a hall.)

GEORGE. Peter! Wendy! *(Winks at his wife.)* They wouldn't want to miss this.

(The BOY and GIRL, twelve and thirteen, respectively, appear after a moment. Both are rather pale and look as if they slept poorly. PETER is engrossed in putting a point to his sister as they enter.)

PETER. Sure, I know, I know, you don't like fish. OK. But fish is one thing and fishing is something else! *(Turning.)* Dad and I'll catch whoppers, won't we, dad?
GEORGE *(blinking)*. What, what?
PETER *(apprehensively)*. Fishing. Loon Lake. You remember... *today*... you promised...
GEORGE. Of course. Yes.

(A buzzer and bell cut in. A TV screen, built into one wall at an angle so we cannot see it, flashes on and off. GEORGE jabs a button. We see the flickering shadows on his face as the screen glows.)

GEORGE. Yes?
SECRETARY'S RADIO VOICE. Mr. Hadley...
GEORGE *(aware of his son's eyes)*. Yes? Yes...
SECRETARY'S VOICE. A special board meeting is called for 11. A helicopter is on its way to pick you up.
GEORGE. I... thanks.

(GEORGE snaps the screen off, but cannot turn to face his son.)

GEORGE. I'm sorry, Peter. They own me, don't they?

(PETER nods mutely.)

LYDIA *(helpfully)*. Well, now, it isn't all bad. Here's the new playroom finished and ready.
GEORGE *(hearing)*. Sure, sure... you children don't know how lucky you are.

(THE CHILDREN stare silently into the room, as GEORGE opens the door very wide so we get a good view.)

WENDY. Is that all there is to it?
PETER. But-- it's *empty.*
GEORGE. It only *looks* empty. It's a machine, but more than a machine!

(He has fallen into the salesman's cadence as he tries to lead THE CHILDREN through the door. They will not move. Perturbed, he reaches in past them and touches a switch. Immediately the room begins to hum. Slowly, GEORGE HADLEY steps gingerly into the room.)

GEORGE. Here, now. Watch me. If you please.

(GEORGE has addressed this last to the ceiling, in a pompous tone. The humming becomes louder. THE CHILDREN wait, unimpressed. GEORGE glances at them and then says, quickly:)

GEORGE. Let there be light.

(The dull ceiling dissolves into very bright light as if the sun had come from a cloud! Electronic music begins to build edifices of sound. THE CHILDREN, startled, shield their eyes, looking in at their father.)

GEORGE. Paris. The blue hour of twilight. The gold hour of sunset. An Eiffel Tower, please, of bronze! An Arc de Triomphe of shining brass! Let fountains toss forth fiery lava. Let the Seine be a torrent of gold!

(The light becomes golden within the room, bathing him.)

GEORGE. Egypt now! Shape pyramids of white-hot stone. Carve Sphinx from ancient sand! There! There! Do you see, children? Come in! Don't stand out there!

(THE CHILDREN, standing on either side of the door, do not move. GEORGE pretends not to notice.)

GEORGE. Enough! Begone!

(The lights go out, leaving only a dim light spotted on George's face. The electronic music dies.)

GEORGE. There! What do you think, eh?
WENDY. It's great.
GEORGE. Great? It's a miracle, that's what it is. There's a giant's eye, a giant's ear, a giant's brain in each of those walls, that remembers every city, town, hill, mountain, ocean, every birdsong, every language, all the music of the world. In three dimensions, by God. Name anything. The room will hear and obey.
PETER *(looking steadily at him)*. You sound like a salesman.
GEORGE *(off balance)*. Do I? Well, no harm. We all have some melodrama in us needs bleeding out on occasion. Tones the system. Go in, kids, go on.

(WENDY creeps in a toe. PETER does not move.)

GEORGE. Peter, you heard me!

(Helicopter thunder floods the house. ALL look up. Huge shadows flutter in a side window. GEORGE, relieved, breaks, moves from the room.)

GEORGE. There's my helicopter. Lydia, will you see me to the door?
LYDIA *(hesitating)*. George...?

GEORGE *(still moving)*. Have fun, kids! *(Stops, suddenly, thinking.)* Peter? Wendy? Not even 'Thanks'?
WENDY *(calmly)*. Thanks a lot, dad.

(She nudges PETER, who does not even look at his father.)

PETER *(quietly)*. Thanks...

(THE CHILDREN, left behind, turn slowly to face the door of the playroom. WENDY puts one hand into the room. The room hums, strangely, now, at her approach. It is a different sound from the one we heard when GEORGE entered the place. The hum now has an atonal quality. WENDY moves out into the empty space, turns, and waits for PETER to follow, reluctantly. The humming grows.)

WENDY. I don't know what to ask it for. You. Go ahead. Please. Ask it to show us something.

(PETER relents, shuts his eyes, thinks, then whispers.)

WENDY. What? I didn't hear you.
PETER. The room did. Look.

(He nods. Shadows stir on the walls, colors dilate. THE CHILDREN look about, obviously fascinated at what is only suggested to the audience.)

WENDY. That's a lake. *Loon* Lake!
PETER. Yes.

WENDY. Oh, it's so blue! It's like the sky turned upside down. And there's a boat, white as snow, on the water! It's moving toward us.

(We hear the sound of water lapping, the sound of oars at a distance.)

WENDY. Someone's rowing the boat.
PETER. A boy.
WENDY. Someone's behind the boy.
PETER. A man.
WENDY. Why, it's you, and dad!
PETER. Is it? Yes. Now we've stopped, the lines are out, fishing. *(Suddenly excited.)* There. I've caught a big one! A big one!

(We hear a distant splash of water.)

WENDY. It's beautiful. It's all silver coins!
PETER. It's a beaut, all right. Boy! Boy!
WENDY. Oh, it slipped off the line! It's gone!
PETER. That isn't--
WENDY *(disappointed)*. The boat... it's going away. The fog's coming up. I can hardly see the boat... or you or dad.
PETER. Neither can I...
WENDY *(forlorn)*. The boat's gone. Bring it back, Peter.
PETER. Come back!

(An echo, way off, repeats his words. The playroom grows dimmer.)

PETER. It's no use. The room's broken.

WENDY. You're not trying. Come back! Come back!
PETER. Come back!

(LYDIA enters on this last, slightly concerned.)

LYDIA. Peter, Wendy? Is everything all right?
PETER. Sure, swell...
LYDIA *(checks her watch)*. Have you tried Mexico yet? The instructions book said the most wonderful things about the Aztec ruins there. Well! I'll be downtown at 10:45, at Mrs. Morgan's at 11:30, at Mrs. Harrison's at noon, if you should want me. The automatic lunch timer will go off at 12:15, eat, both of you! At one o'clock do your musical tapes with the violin and piano. I've written the schedule on the electric board--
PETER. Sure, Mom, sure--
LYDIA. Have fun, and don't forget Bombay, India, while you're at it!

(She exits and is hardly gone when: a thunderous roar ensues. PETER, throwing out one hand, pointing at the walls, has given a shout.)

PETER. All right! Now! Now! Now!

(An unseen avalanche thunders down a vast mountain in torrents of destruction. WENDY seizes Peter's arm.)

WENDY. Peter!
PETER. Now! More! More!
WENDY. Peter, stop it!

(The avalanche filters away to dust and silence.)

WENDY. What are you doing? What was that?

PETER *(looks at her strangely)*. Why, an avalanche, of course. I made an avalanche come down a mountain, a hundred thousand tons of stone and rocks. An avalanche.

WENDY *(looking about)*. You filled the lake. It's gone. The boat's gone. You and dad are gone.

PETER. Did I? Is it? Are they? *(Awed.)* Yeah... sure... that's right. Hey, this is... *fun... (He accents this last word oddly.) You* try something now, Wendy.

WENDY. I... London Bridge. Let me see... London Bridge.

(The shadows spin slowly. PETER and WENDY stand, watching.)

PETER. You're stupid. That's no fun. Think, girl, think! Now! Let's see. *(A beat.)* Let there be darkness! Let there be-- night!

(Blackout. The lights come up. We hear a helicopter come down, fly away. GEORGE enters, stage left.)

GEORGE. Hi! I'm home!

(In a small alcove, which represents only a section of the kitchen, far stage right, LYDIA is seated staring at a machine that is mixing something for her. GEORGE advances across the stage.)

GEORGE. Hi! How goes it?

LYDIA *(looking up)*. Oh, hello. Fine.

GEORGE. Perfect, you mean. Flying home just now I thought, Good Lord, what a house! We've lived in it since the kids were born, never lacked for a thing. A great life. Incredible.

LYDIA. It's incredible, all right, but--

GEORGE. But what?

LYDIA. This kitchen. I don't know. It's-- *selfish*. Sometimes I think it'd be happy if I just stayed out, stayed away completely, and let it work. *(She tries to smile.)* Aren't I silly?

GEORGE. You are indeed. All these time-saving devices; no one on the block has half as many.

LYDIA *(unconvinced)*. You're right, of course. *(She pauses.)* George... I want you to look at the playroom.

GEORGE. Look at it? Is it broken? Good Lord, we've only had it eight weeks.

LYDIA. No, not broken, exactly. Well, see it first, then you tell *me*.

(She starts leading him across the stage.)

GEORGE. Fair enough. Lead on, Macduff.

LYDIA. I first noticed this "thing" I'm going to show you about four weeks ago. Then it kept reoccurring. I didn't want to worry you, but now, with the thing happening all the time-- well-- *here*.

(She opens the playroom door. GEORGE steps in and looks as across a great distance, silently.)

GEORGE. Lord, but it's quiet.

LYDIA. Too quiet, yes.