Keith Waldrop

HOPE; OR, THE RUINS OF EMPIRE

*N. B.*

This play was written for Wastepaper Theater, a poets' theater that performed off and on for twenty years (1973-1993) in Providence RI. Most of the plays were given on a simple raised platform at one end of a gallery in the Rhode Island School of Design's Museum of Art. Others were in lofts or lounges, always with primitive lighting and no technical assistance.

For my own plays, there was at best a rudimentary script and often none at all. The version given here is not something from which the actors worked, but as I have been able to remember it.

I have broken the speeches into lines in order to indicate vocal patterns. It should be clear that these are *not* verse patterns—the dialogue is entirely in prose.

*Original cast:*

**Narrator**  Keith Waldrop & Ulrike Emigh

**Sleeping Beauty** Doretta Wildes

**Giant** Pitt & Sarah Harding

**Light & Sound** Kit Pancoast, Lisa Cohen, Mary Caponegro

*Bare stage: it will be lit by flashlights. These are directed from three different mounts. Any actor is followed by at least one. The spill illuminates (dimly) other parts of the stage or house.*

*The NARRATOR (male), wearing an old tan Stetson, drifts onto the stage. He addresses the audience in a casual manner.*

NARRATOR

This play, as you can see from the program, is called *Hope; or, the Ruins of* *Empire*.

Of course, that's just the title: it isn't meant to indicate the content of the play.

“Hope,” as I'm using it here—in the title—is not the theological virtue,

and not the quality of optimism in looking towards the future.

In either of those cases, I wouldn't have much to show.

I think of “hope” simply as a stage technique, a way of getting from scene to scene, from one breakdown to another.

The part about “empire”...

[pauses to think]

“Hope” is too short for a complete title.

Actually, what the play is about: I thought I would just give you...

[a little embarrassed]

well... a bit of autobiography. Oh, understand: I've

[pause]

...been in Providence now for a good number of years and... I must admit...

...nothing much has happened since I've been here.

Not that I'm complaining. But you wouldn't want to watch...

hm... no... Well, but...

[gradually more confident]

Well, before I came here, before I came to Providence, I had... well...

*adventures*.

Oh yes. I started having adventures while still quite young.

It came about, actually, from reading a phrase from somebody else's adventure. It was somebody who had “ventured forth.”

Wearing armor that was “the color of dead leaves.”

[pause]

I didn't have any armor.

But it was late fall.

I ventured forth.

*He moves down, during the next speeches, almost into the audience, in a large counter-clockwise circle. Flashlights follow him.*

NARRATOR

I wandered.

[pause]

I didn't know exactly where I was going.

If I had, it wouldn't have been wandering.

Or adventure.

Also, I wasn't all that certain where I was starting from.

It was fall.

It always seemed to be fall.

Adventure time.

I slogged through piles of dead wet leaves.

Sometimes they were dry.

They were always dead...

...since it was always fall.

And then:

*He stops, at the extreme left of the stage. A sound has begun, unnoticeable at first but constantly growing: it is a sound of snoring and it is not localized, but diffused throughout the auditorium.*

NARRATOR

I came to a growth of briar

[mimes its extent and solidity]

which seemed impenetrable. And I knew immediately that somehow I must get through it. I knew: because on the other side, in the distance, there was a faint light I had to reach.

It was, by the way, night time. A fall night.

*A flashlight moves across the stage until it picks out a small old-fashioned rocker, in which SLEEPING BEAUTY lies asleep. The generalized snore has increased.*

NARRATOR

So I struggled to get over and through the briar, which scratched my skin and tore my clothes. I fought it for what seemed hours, days.

*He mimes fighting his way through the briar, until--more and more entangled--he drops the mime and walks across.*

NARRATOR

It was easier then. I was still young.

*The snore is very loud. He crosses to SLEEPING BEAUTY, gazes at her, finally bends over her—but noticing the audience is watching, straightens up again, moves around until he can kiss her without the audience seeing.*

*He bends and kisses her, then stands back.*

*Nothing happens.*

*He is embarrassed, moves to a different position and, now in full sight of the audience—kisses her on the forehead.*

*Nothing happens. The snoring is extremely loud.*

*He kisses her on the mouth.*

*He pokes her shoulder.*

*He gently shakes her.*

*He raises her eyelid,*

*checks her pulse.*

*He shakes her violently, rocker and all.*

*He rushes away from her to center down stage. At the same instant, the light goes off SLEEPING BEAUTY and the snoring stops.*

NARRATOR

She seemed settled in for a hundred years!

*He paces a moment in agitation, then settles back into his narrative.*

NARRATOR

Well.

[moving into the aisle]

I should perhaps mention that at this period of my life...

*He moves up the aisle, a flashlight on him. At the same time, the other (female) NARRATOR comes down a little way into the aisle towards him. He breaks off in the middle of a word, puts his hat on her head—she is dressed similarly—and goes out by the aisle. The flashlight now follows* ***her*** *back to the stage, as she finishes the sentence, having become the narrator.*

NARRATOR (MALE)

...I made a number of changes in my life, some of them rather ex-

NARRATOR (FEMALE)

treme, but they aren't what I want to tell you about. The important thing was my trip north—to the far far north. I had heard, you see, that in the far north some tracks had been found which suggested the survival of the eohippus. So naturally...

*A sound has begun, dispersed throughout the house, but hardly yet audible. It is a sound of slow steady footsteps, as of a giant's tread, and it is gradually increasing in volume...*

NARRATOR

I ventured north.

For adventure.

It was cold,

though still fall.

I went looking for the creature's tracks...

[she is bent over, scanning the ground, moving in a slow circle clockwise]

...thinking what a real adventure it would be to track down this tiny horse, a prehistoric mount that would fit into my pocket.

*The sound has increased and now threatens to drown out the NARRATOR's speech, though she does not seem to notice it.*

NARRATOR

The ground was covered with dead pine needles.

The trouble is I wasn't sure how tiny the beast really was. In fact, the longer I looked for it, the tinier I expected to find it.

Finally I was lifting single dead pine needles, afraid it might be lurking under any one...

*She continues to tell the audience of her adventure, but from this point it matters very little what words she uses, since the sound of giant steps has become thunderous.*

*And the GIANT is now coming slowly but steadily down the aisle.*

*The sound of its steps still gets louder and louder.*

*The NARRATOR continues to talk—unheard—until the GIANT, as if not noticing so small an obstacle, walks into her—pushing her slowly before its measured steps.*

*NARRATOR screams as she is pushed off stage up-left.*

*The moment NARRATOR and GIANT are out of sight, the sound stops.*

*After a brief pause—light from the flashlights has remained on the place they have gone out—NARRATOR reappears somewhat rumpled and just trying to get his hat back in shape. Yes,* his.  *It is again the MALE NARRATOR.*

NARRATOR

That was, in all my adventures, my narrowest escape.

[puts his hat back on his head]

I thought it wiser, for a while at least, to pursue my adventuring farther south.

[moving counter-clockwise]

So I went down.

I went deeper and deeper.

Decaying magnolia gave way to dead live-oak.

All the vegetation seemed brown and withered.

[mimes a moment of something like the earlier briar]

Except the kudzu.

And then...

[stops moving at center stage]

...I met a mysterious stranger, who gave me...

[turns in place, and when he is again facing the audience, he has produced from somewhere a tin box, about the size of a pound tea can, fastened with bands of black tape]

...a treasure.

[pause--then as if challenged:]

Well he said it was a treasure.

He said...

[remembering slowly, gazing at box]

...he said it contained everything that was lacking. He said...

...that in it was all that mankind needed...

...or wanted. He said...

[gazes, fascinated, at the box]

He

said

don't open it.

Don't open it, he said,

just deliver it.

And he put it in my hands

and left.

[follows imaginary exit of mysterious stranger, looks again at box, looks again to be sure stranger is gone—then explains quickly to audience:]

I couldn't help myself. I was just...

*A sound has already begun, throughout the house, like nails being shaken in a tin box—but it only gradually becomes audible, then louder and louder...*

NARRATOR

...just too curious.

[pulling the tape off]

I got the tape off.

I broke a fingernail.

I pried with a knife, with a screwdriver.

With a crowbar.

*He is beginning to shake it in desperation. The noise, both from the box he is shaking and from the air around, is growing unbearable.*

NARRATOR

A power drill.

A chain saw.

A pile driver.

A cyclotron.

*He is as if in a tantrum and the noise is deafening.*

*Explosion, blackout, sudden quiet.*

*After a moment of dark, the flashlights come on one by one, move around as if searching, and all together find the NARRATOR center stage, just where he was.*

*He is standing quietly, without the box.*

*Female NARRATOR is standing just behind him, in an identical hat. It is the male NARRATOR who speaks first.*

NARRATOR

I never got the box open.

I never delivered it either.

There was no address on it.

*As he talks, he moves down stage and the female NARRATOR comes forward until she is on the same level, just to his left.*

NARRATOR (MALE)

Shortly after that, I came to Providence.

NARRATOR (FEMALE)

The first thing I noticed was that the trees were dying.

*They are moving, slowly, side by side, into and up the aisle.*

NARRATOR (MALE)

But as I look back to my earlier, more adventurous, life, the thing that seems oddest to me...

NARRATOR (FEMALE)

It's hard to explain, but all that time, I thought, I really, seriously, thought...

NARRATOR (IN UNISON)

[at exit]

...that I was dreadfully unhappy.