

'Your Play Has Been Sold to TV!'



IT FOODS

Lee Strasberg plays the pivotal character in "The Last Tenant"—"It is not a pretty story," the playwright admits.

By **GEORGE RUBINO**

[This evening at 9, ABC-TV will present "The Last Tenant," a two-hour play starring Tony Lo Bianco, Lee Strasberg and Christine Lahti. It was written by George Rubino and his first work to be produced on television. The following is his account of the events leading up to this presentation.]

The message my wife had left me on the typewriter was brief: "Lloyd Richards called. Will call back." Lloyd is artistic director of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, where my television play, "The Last Tenant," had been given a workshop production last summer while I was on vacation from my job as an English teacher at John Dewey High School in Brooklyn.

Later that evening the phone rang. It was Lloyd.

"How are you doing?" he asked casually, too casually, I thought.

"I'm still trying to sell my play," I answered.

"Well, you don't have to bother," he said. "It's been sold."

I gasped.

"ABC notified me this morning that it's presenting you with its Theater Award. Can you be at Sardi's next Monday at 10? There'll be an award ceremony followed by a press conference."

Sardi's? I'd never been to Sardi's in my life. And a press conference?

Lloyd continued. "Reporters from the media will ask you questions about you, your play."

"Should I prepare a statement?" I found myself asking.

"If you want, but it's not necessary."

I hung up and repeated the conversation to my wife to prove to myself that I wasn't dreaming. Then I proceeded to call my family and some friends.

The ABC Theater Award, as it is called, carries with it a \$10,000 prize

and the possibility of a prime-time production on the ABC network. The money, needless to say, was quite welcome. But the idea that a play of mine might be produced for the first time, and on network television at that, left me slightly delirious. Up to this point, the only writings of mine that had seen production were comedy sketches for nightclub reviews in New York and Boston. The remainder of my literary output consisted of four unproduced stage plays.

I wrote "The Last Tenant" as a screen play in the spring of 1976. Briefly, it is about an aging, undeserving father who calls upon his grown children for help. His appeal dredges up events from the past and forces the children to confront their anger, their resultant guilt and, finally, the question of filial responsibility.

It was not a pretty story, and it had a downbeat ending. For this reason, I expected that it would run into trouble somewhere along the yellow-brick road to network acceptance. And it did.

The play was completed in early summer and then began a year's odyssey across the desks of agents from New York to Los Angeles and back to New York. The agents espoused similarly. The play had merit, but they could not handle it because television audiences eschewed plays whose central character was an aging man, especially one shunned by his children.

One agent wrote me a long letter praising the play but adding, "... your choice of subject matter is one that, for most Americans, presents a 'let's-try-to-ignore-it' sensitive area—growing old and being old. ... Secondly, you compound the problem by having an unlovable 'hero'—Father."

The agents were generally in agreement: The play was not ready to be done on commercial television. Or, commercial television was not ready for my play, depending on one's viewpoint. There was, however, one agent, Suzy Brightener, who agreed to represent me. She began pushing the play with producers both here and on the

West Coast, one or two of whom expressed guarded interest.

I feel I should comment here on what seems to be a misconception among many unpublished writers: that you have to break down doors to get literary agents to look at your work. This is not so, at least in my experience. Rarely has a script of mine been returned unread. Often, I have received a one- or even a two-page criticism. Sometimes, I even agreed with the criticism.

Meanwhile, in December of 1976, I submitted the play to the National Playwrights Conference of the prestigious O'Neill Center, which each year takes 12 to 18 new writers in hand and helps them expand their understanding of the writing process through stage readings of their plays. The purpose is admirable: to allow each script to develop in an atmosphere free of commercial limitations. I sent the play off, and I waited.

I remember it was late spring of 1977. I took a group of students to hear Tennessee Williams speak on the mysteries of his (our?) craft. I hung on his every word for a clue to his writing genius. Afterwards, with a rush of creative energy, I hurried home to continue work on a new play. And there in the mailbox was a letter from the O'Neill Center. My play had been accepted!

'I expected that my script would run into trouble along the yellow-brick road to network acceptance. It did.'

In July, I journeyed up to Waterford, Conn., with 15 other writers and a crew of professional directors, actors and technicians to the center's lush estate overlooking Long Island Sound. We spent four exciting weeks developing our material, 12 stage and four TV plays.

It so happens that 1977 was the year ABC established its Theater Award, aimed at encouraging the creation of new dramatic works, to be bestowed upon one of the writers at the conference. Such an award was heartening, to say the least. I'm sure that during the first days of the conference, it was in the minds of all the writers, but in deference to the noncompetitive spirit of the conference, it was never spoken about.

My play was developed the last week of the conference. In five wildly hectic but exhilarating days, it was rehearsed and taped in a television studio that had been converted from a cold, red-with-white-trim barn. The facilities were rather limited, due to a tight operating budget; yet, the play miraculously came alive. On the following Saturday morning, a group of several hundred people, made up of actors, directors, critics, and Bob Shanks, vice president in charge of programming at ABC, assembled in the barn for the showing.

I sat off to the side and watched, exhausted and nervous, but proud. And I immediately saw the play's flaws. Character motivation wasn't always clear; Father's relationship with his older son Joey needed sharper focus.

The hour-and-40-minute production was followed by a critique in which members of the audience discussed the play's style and structure. At one point, it erupted into a heated debate on aging parents and their children, and the

question of tribal rites. Whatever the merits of the play, it at least stimulated lively discourse. I was gratified.

The conference ended in early August, and I ferried across Long Island Sound to my Amagansett, L.I., home to work on revisions based on the critical comments and my own perceptions of what I had seen.

In September, I went back to my teaching job. By now I was working on a new screen play. My agent was showing the revised script around. Life went on as before. Nothing had changed. I was earmarked for oblivion. Until that evening in October when Lloyd Richards called.

On Monday, Oct. 17, my wife and I splurged on a taxi to Sardi's for the award presentation. This was my Walter Mitty moment. I was met by Lloyd, George White, the president of the O'Neill Center, reporters from the media and executives from ABC. I was introduced to Fred Silverman, then the president of ABC Entertainment, and with camera lights flashing at me as though I were a celebrity, I remarked to him, "This is hard to believe."

He answered, "You'll believe it when you see it on television next June."

But June was a long way off. Ahead were months of production meetings, rewrites and on-location shooting in such New York locales as Greenwich Village, Manhattan's Upper East Side and Staten Island.

First, the task of finding a producer. ABC selected the Emmy Award-winning Herbert Brodtkin and Robert Berger, who had produced the recent miniseries "Holocaust." And then the knuckling downbegan.

We tackled the problem of unexplicit character motivation. Why was the younger son Vinny particularly angry with Father? I had not cleared that up in the first rewrite. Vinny had to be "fleshed out." And Joey's relationship with his fiancée Carol was undeveloped. In the original, she appeared briefly in two scenes. Surely, her role needed expansion.

These script conferences didn't always run smoothly. There were conceptual differences, as there are in most collaborative efforts. Messrs. Brodtkin and Berger felt it was important to evoke stronger audience identification with Father; therefore, he should have more endearing qualities. I maintained that such changes would necessarily dissipate his children's anger toward him and alter the play's theme: the limits of filial responsibility. On the contrary, the producers countered, Father would be a more fully realized character; this would strengthen rather than sacrifice the theme. We went at it, but our discussions were always cordial and friendly. In the end, there were compromises on both sides, without rancor or arm-twisting.

A theater critic once said that the real test of a playwright comes during the rewrite stage. I understood now what he meant. For the first time, I was working against a deadline, adding a peppery tinge to the creative process. And I had to consider the views of other professionals with years of production experience, measure them against my own and arrive at a working script that I hoped would improve dramatically while remaining true to its original concept.

Whether or not we were successful is still a question in my mind. I am at a point where it is no longer possible for me to judge the play dispassionately. I've been too close to it for too long a period, and I have lost an objectivity that I expect will be recovered in time and with a certain distance. For now, I will have to leave it up to tonight's TV audience to make that judgment.