

“SNAKE BITES GU ACTOR, PLAY GOES ON”

By Bill Bremer

I have several memories from appearing in the Mask & Bauble production of Sam Shepherd’s *OPERATION: SIDEWINDER* at Georgetown University, but only one of them involved a midnight run to the ER and a subsequent police interview.

OPERATION: SIDEWINDER was originally staged at Lincoln Center in 1970, and Jack Hofsiss wasted no time in getting the rights in order to direct the first D.C. area production at G.U. (I recall that was the first time I worked with Jack.) It was an interesting piece about, among other things, the expansion of the West and the destruction of indigenous cultures who stood in the way.

As always, DBM encouraged us to do more, to take risks, to push the envelope, or whatever the phrase was back in the early ‘70s, to stage this experimental piece in new and unexpected ways. And as undergraduates trying to make sense of our lives before we became eligible for the draft at the height of the Vietnam War, we responded wholeheartedly to his enthusiasm.

So one interesting element we introduced to the production in tiny Stage One, where we were never more than 2 or 3 feet from the audience, was live snakes. In the second act Paul Hume and I entered carrying live 4-foot rat snakes for Shepherd’s take on a mystical Native American religious ritual.

Each evening, it was the same – audience members chuckled when they first saw snakes coiled in our hands, thinking they were made of rubber. “Oh, look, it’s a snake! Ooh...”

Once the snakes started to move, however, the mood changed in a heartbeat.

One night, as Paul and I stepped close to the audience, snakes undulating in our hands, a fellow right in front of me suddenly jerked back. So the snake reared back too, and started sliding off my hand. I instinctively grabbed it by the end of its tail. It began to whip around like a spinning lasso as I reached for the head with my other hand.

Before I could grab it, though, the snake embedded its teeth in the webbing between my right thumb and forefinger. I jerked my hand away in reflex, but it managed to bite me twice more before I finally got a grip behind its head.

Fortunately, Paul had moved quickly to place his snake back in its cage offstage before returning. I remember that his eyes were very big as I reached out to hand him my snake—“Could you do me a favor?”—but he silently took it and disappeared quickly offstage.

I later learned that all animal bites must by law be reported to the police. At midnight in the hospital I was still waiting for my tetanus shot among that

evenings' casualties when a tired-looking policeman shuffled up to me, clipboard in hand.

"You the guy with the dog bite?"

The next morning I was still sleeping off last night's adrenalin when the phone rang. It was a young reporter new to his job at *The Washington Post*, though he tried hard to sound like it was the fourth snakebite story he'd written that week.

When the piece broke later that day, the headline was, "Snake Bites GU Actor, Show Goes On" and the first sentence read, "A 4-foot-long yellow rat snake starring in a Georgetown University performance of the play "Operation Sidewinder" became annoyed with one of his fellow actors Saturday night and bit him three times..."

That afternoon I went to Stage One, where several other cast members were concerned that the newspaper write-up would result in the show being closed early. Jack, however, knew better. "Wait 'til we hear from DBM," he said.

When Donn appeared, he walked right up to me, a look of real concern on his face. "Bill, are you all right?"

When I waved my bandaged hand with a sheepish smile, he said, "Thank you for holding on to that snake. If you'd dropped it in the audience, well, that wouldn't have been good, would it?"

I nodded in agreement. Then he flashed me that DBM smile.

"But what exciting theater that was!"

I couldn't have felt better if I'd planned the whole thing.