

Letter to the Editor

To the Editor:

. . . I give you my impressions of "The Theatre of the Miraculous" by Mel Gordon, which appeared in the June issue of *The Drama Review*. It is not Mr. Gordon's sincerity that I question, but his pursuit of the facts. It would have been possible for him to talk with people who knew Gurdjieff, who are now actively participating in his work, and could even have given him photographs taken considerably later than 1924.

Well, shall I begin at the end? The article finishes with the statement that Gurdjieff's exercises are enacted only in private by small groups of individuals.

But this is not so. There are many thousands of people now studying the Gurdjieff movements throughout the Americas, Europe and Australia, and I have myself participated in, supervised or witnessed large public demonstrations in New York City, Toronto, Boston and Washington, D. C. From his derogation of the event, it is clear that Mr. Gordon was not present at the two full-sized demonstrations at the Fashion Institute in New York in 1961.

What is more, documentary films have been shown at the Museum of Modern Art, Lincoln Center, many Broadway theatres, and on the Toronto University campus before large audiences.

It is difficult to understand why Gordon failed to talk with people at your own university who could have given him their impressions. Professor Joseph Campbell, the distinguished mythologist, may not be on the staff of New York University, but his wife, Jean Erdman, who teaches the dance there, has with her husband seen many movements films. Anne Fremantle, historian, who recently gave a course at NYU on the history of mysticism, has taken classes in movements.

While we are on this subject, the public at large will certainly get a glimpse of movements in the film, "Meetings With Remarkable Men," directed by Peter Brook, which is soon to be shown in New York. It is strange that Gordon missed that front-page article about it in the theatre section of the Sunday *New York Times* a few months ago.

Again there is reason to question his thoroughness when it is obvious that he has used chiefly the well-intentioned, journalistic hash that Kathleen Speeth has made out of the books of Ouspensky, Walker, Bennett and Nott. He accepts her dubious instructions as authentic. He credits her with reconstructing "major" movements. She has not done so for the simple fact that she does not know them.

Kathleen, whom I have known since her birth, was one of the children between seven and eleven years of age who were invited to a party Gurdjieff gave in late 1948. That no doubt influenced her. Later, she was for a short time part of a beginners' group at the Gurdjieff Foundation, and took part in movements classes until her departure for California. Her introductory paperback on the Gurdjieff teaching would be more useful if she had taken the trouble to correct her mistakes in spelling, in dates and, unfortunately, in her "transcriptions."

It seems necessary to speak of this chief source of Gordon's information because he failed, unhappily, to talk with people who knew Gurdjieff. Jessmin Howarth, for example, who has taught the Gurdjieff movements since 1924 both here and abroad, could have given him much material and even some photographs instead of all that old stuff that has appeared everywhere.

Contrary to Gordon's statement that after 1924 Gurdjieff lost interest in the movements, the fact is that in 1939 in Paris he worked with many young French people, created scores of new dances, and in 1948 brought them to New York where night after night hundreds of people worked under his direct instruction. Gordon might also have learned something of the work of Jeanne de Salzmann, with whom Gurdjieff at his death left the continuation of the teaching.

Are you, as scholars, really interested in truth, however dull, or has journalism (my own profession) so debased us that we surrender to sensationalism because it makes a good story? As one who was brought up to admire the integrity of scholars, I am about to accept disillusionment with them as I read inaccurate, self-serving books and articles about the Gurdjieff teaching and the man.

The two main arms of the Gurdjieff teaching are the ideas and the movements. There are other forms, but these two require cultivation if the teaching is to be understood and lived.

In these Aquarian days, it should be more possible than it was in my youth to realize that head information is not enough; intelligence of feeling is necessary, and does not grow like dandelions on journalistic terraces. Articles and books, even good ones, are not enough. It is difficult to articulate direct experience.

Those of us who have been studying this teaching for many years are probably labeled "private" because we do not proselytize. Enthusiastic converts are not what we need, but we welcome people of intelligence, skepticism and conscience. Otherwise an ancient esoteric teaching, in its requisite twentieth-century dress, may be turned into the moonshine that deceives ardent readers into believing that they know who Gurdjieff was and what he taught.

In the meantime, dear editors, hear my prayer that academic journals undertake more accurate investigation, even if the result is less astounding, but more in keeping with the study in depth of what our ancestors once knew.

With best wishes,
Louise Welch

Mel Gordon replies: When the editors of The Drama Review began to plan the Theatre of the Occult and Bizarre issue (T78) almost one year ago, it occurred to us that we might receive a number of strange, hysterical, or crank replies to various articles. While Louise Welch's letter-to-the-editor doesn't exactly fall into any of those categories, her tone and logic as expressed in the above letter is not just disturbing but mystifying: nearly her entire response is taken up with criticizing an imaginary article, certainly not something I wrote or ever intended to write.

First of all, my piece "Gurdjieff's Movement Demonstrations: the Theatre of the Miraculous" concerned itself exclusively with G.I. Gurdjieff's actual work in the theatre, which ended in 1924. The article was not about the much later activities of Gurdjieff's disciples, Peter Brook's, Louise Welch's, those of her friends, or psychological competitors. My intention, which, I believe, was quite clear, was not to teach, expose, ridicule, or proselytize Gurdjieff's movements or personal philosophy, but rather to look at his work from a performance and actor-training point of view. This is something that has never been attempted before in the theatre world.

I am accused, however, in Welch's letter of having "missed" a feature article in the New York Times on Peter Brook's newest film Meetings With Remarkable Men, based on Gurdjieff's early travels at the turn-of-the-century. Of course, I didn't "miss" it. But what does it have to do with Gurdjieff's 1923-1924 theatre productions or my article?

Welch also accuses me of having "used chiefly" Kathleen Speeth's book The Gurdjieff Work as my source material for the article. Although it's obvious to Welch, in fact it is not true at all. Of the over two dozen primary published or unpublished sources I consulted for the article, none included Speeth's writings. Why? Because Kathleen Speeth, like Louise Welch, was not with Gurdjieff in the years 1915 to 1924 when he was preparing or staging performances. Naturally, I limited myself to using only first-hand accounts and descriptions. The Drama Review is not usually interested in reinterpretations and opinions as much as in descriptions and documentations of the original

performance work. It is for this reason that we did not publish photographs "that were taken considerably later than 1924" as Welch suggests we should have.

Louise Welch does bring up two facts that I was unaware of and which are more interesting than the rest of her letter. She points out that in 1939, fifteen years—not twenty-five, as I had written—after his accident, Gurdjieff returned to some limited work on his movements in Paris and again in New York in 1948. Although neither of these experiences resulted in public performances, this piece of information is not widely known, and I wish I had included it in my article.

Finally, I want to restate some Drama Review policy: We warmly welcome letters-to-the-editor, replies, article corrections, etc. The function of the magazine is to expand and change contemporary and historical notions of performance. We want to encourage the making of new kinds of theatre. Any corrections or additions to articles would be useful for all of us. What I find objectionable in Welch's letter is a strange subtext that no one can write about Gurdjieff without her knowledge or approval although, in the case of my article, I was writing about a period in his life of which Welch had no first-hand experience.