

Won to the Light

A Recasting

David Cole

2020

Characters

The STAGE MANAGER

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS

[The stage is set for a blocking rehearsal, in the course of which the STAGE MANAGER will coach the REPLACEMENT ACTRESS into taking over from her recently departed predecessor the role of Genesis, an actress actually converted—“won to the light”—while performing onstage the scene of her character’s conversion.

The boundaries of the playing-area are marked by small strips of luminescent tape on the stage floor.

At various points around the playing-area stand rudimentary pieces of furniture—a stepladder, a side table, a sawhorse—rough rehearsal stand-ins, it will emerge, for the elegant furnishings (étagère, escritoire, credenza) referred to in the dialogue.

The only illumination is worklight supplied by a rudimentary floor-lamp, little more than a bulb on a pole.

The STAGE MANAGER carries a large looseleaf promptbook, in which, at rise, he appears momentarily to have lost his place.

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS sits slumped on the floor, her face in her lap, her long dark hair tumbling forward onto the ribbed rehearsal skirt she wears over jeans. Whether this posture bespeaks alienation/exhaustion or she has just adopted it as an aid to concentration is not clear straight off.

In what follows, it will be noted that the STAGE MANAGER’s speeches do not contain as much in the way of physical directives (“look back over your shoulder,” “cheat a couple of steps down-left”) as would, no doubt, the transcript of an actual blocking rehearsal. This is because the STAGE MANAGER conveys much or most of his physical guidance of the REPLACEMENT ACTRESS by physically leading, turning and positioning her—by walking her through it.

That a speech delivered by the REPLACEMENT ACTRESS or the STAGE MANAGER is in fact dialogue uttered by the character she or he has temporarily assumed—“Genesis” for the REPLACEMENT ACTRESS, “Domenico” for the STAGE MANAGER—is indicated by its speehtag reading (in bold) The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as “Genesis,” The STAGE MANAGER as “Domenico”.

The STAGE MANAGER, after some searching, suddenly finds his place in the promptbook and sets about reading aloud a long stage direction.]

The STAGE MANAGER

Act II. It is now many years since the evening depicted in Act I when the actress Genesis, playing a scene in which her character undergoes a sudden religious conversion, was herself actually converted—“won to the light”—mid-performance, and in that hour fled the scene for a wilderness cave where she has passed the intervening decades in fasting and prayer.

It would be pleasant to report that, with each passing season, Genesis’s certitude has deepened. But the truth is otherwise. “For, after all,” reflects the one-time actress, “how came I to this pass? My character, seeking guidance whether to abscond with her lover, is enjoined by our script to take up a random book in a countryhouse library, open to a random page of that book, drop eye to a random line of print, upon reading which—not she, but I, Genesis, playing her—”

[The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS, who has all this while been sitting slumped on the floor, face in lap, hair tumbling forward, suddenly leaps to her feet, grabs the promptbook out of the STAGE MANAGER’s hands and begins to flip through it, occasionally leafing a few pages back or ahead. The STAGE MANAGER watches for a moment, then addresses her.]

I know, word seems not to have reached our author that these “vast novelistic stage directions” (as your Predecessor liked to call them) are no longer regarded as quite— Plus, of course, have we not all just now slogged through the Act I events here reprised at such length?

[snatches the promptbook back from her]

Let me, then, abridge as I go.

Act II. It is now many years since the actress Genesisia’s onstage conversion while playing a conversion scene drove her from the stage of the Autumn Theatre to life in a cave. Of late, though, she finds her faith wavering, and nothing, she suspects, may rekindle it but to revisit the site of its birth, the stage of the Autumn Theatre, where, if by some miracle the prop book in which she then read her truth be still to hand, she may perhaps turn the page and read what is next for her.

[The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS seems just about to pose a question—which the STAGE MANAGER anticipates.]

I know—you wish to be apprised of the exact moment of your Predecessor’s mid-show walkout—and I shall not fail to tag it for you as we draw nigh. As for *why* she should have fled the scene, motive after motive has been trotted out: grungy dressingrooms, tensions with other actors But your Predecessor was a serious artist, nothing of that sort is likely to have— No, as you have surmised, the only real clue to her taking off is the precise moment of her doing so. But that is still some ways off; suppose we begin at the beginning.

Act II. Enter onto the stage of the Autumn Theatre the one-time actress Genesisia attended by her long-ago director Domenico, whose lines

[points into promptbook]

I shall essay— Don't expect much; I'm stage management, not Brian Dennehy.

—So here your Predecessor would come stumbling on as if blinded by the (not very blinding) work lights and feeling her way over uneven ground.

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as “Genesisia”

I little thought to tread these boards again.

The STAGE MANAGER as “Domenico”

Was ever actor who retired and meant it?

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as “Genesisia”

“Retired” . . . is that what my old colleagues view me as having—?

The STAGE MANAGER as “Domenico”

Word is, you've found yourself a country place.

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as “Genesisia”

A mountain cave, in which to live my faith.

The STAGE MANAGER as “Domenico”

But which, at present, you appear to have forsaken.

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as “Genesisia”

My faith, at present, having forsaken me.

The STAGE MANAGER as **“Domenico”**

And so you are looking to revive your acting career?

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as **“Genesisia”**

It is my faith I am looking to revive.

The STAGE MANAGER as **“Domenico”**

The Autumn Theatre, as you may recall, doesn’t go in much for revivals. Lovely to see you and all, Gen, but now really: what brings you here?

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as **“Genesisia”**

Was it not here—?

The STAGE MANAGER

—Here your Predecessor ventured an inclusive gesture that seemed to take in the entire theatre building.

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as **“Genesisia”**

Was it not here, upon this very stage, that first heaven’s ray—?

The STAGE MANAGER as **“Domenico”**

Please, we all know the story: how, playing a scene in which your character reads off her future from a chance dip into a chanced-on book in a countryhouse library, you, Genesisia, read your own future in those chanced-on words.

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as **“Genesisia”**

All which, I imagine, to you must appear—

The STAGE MANAGER as “Domenico”

The likeliest of outcomes!

[as himself]

—Of this next, your Predecessor once remarked that if, as they say, all huge bad plays somewhere contain their own epitaph . . .

[as “Domenico”]

What more natural for an actor than to take up a book, open, read—and find herself leading another life? Not a few of your colleagues, then and since, have sought to persuade me that your famous “conversion” was all a ploy to break with our company because you weren’t getting the parts. Well, or possibly a ploy to break with *me*. I, though, have ever maintained a childlike faith in the reality of your conversion experience, let this have taken the form of “a voice from on high,” “a sourceless ray”—

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as “Genesia”

Shall I tell you what conversion most resembles? I am on one page of a book, now suddenly another, with no consciousness of having turned the page.

The STAGE MANAGER as “Domenico”

But this is even as I have long suspected: that “the light” broke upon you earlier, elsewhere, in a moment of private reading which, that night, you merely replayed for us here.

[as himself]

—This , by the way, was the opinion of your Predecessor.

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as “**Genesisia**”

I came on my truth in that hour, upon these risers, under those frenels.

The STAGE MANAGER

—Here I have a note that your Predecessor “reprised the all-inclusive gesture,” though in fact I don’t recall her ever actually—

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as “**Genesisia**”

It was from off the topmost shelf of yon étagère

[*The STAGE MANAGER indicates the stepladder.*]

that I reached down at random the volume to which my character poses her great question: *Shall I, then, join him*—that is, the lover she is contemplating running off with—*by the leaf-choked well?* It was seated at yon escritorio

[*The STAGE MANAGER indicates the side table.*]

that I cracked open at random this chanced-on tome and there read off my character’s and my own whole future course. Which having now read off, it was upon yon credenza

[*The STAGE MANAGER indicates the sawhorse.*]

that I turned over the volume that supplied it and departed for my mountain cave.

Wait, though: this was all decades ago. How comes it, then, that étagère, escritorio and credenza are right here where I left them all those seasons since? Is it possible that *Won to the Light* remains in the repertoire of the Autumn Theatre with, I don’t know, Gillian or Tansy now appearing in the role that once I—

The STAGE MANAGER as **“Domenico”**

Gillian and Tansy are long since gone to dwell in the Home for Retired Players, as have by now the greater part of the Autumn Company.

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as **“Genesia”**

Yet the stage is set.

The STAGE MANAGER as **“Domenico”**

And has been every night since your departure.

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as **“Genesia”**

In the hope? On the chance?

The STAGE MANAGER as **“Domenico”**

For a tour.

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as **“Genesia”**

Tour?

The STAGE MANAGER

[as himself]

—This moment your Predecessor never played the same twice.

THE REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as **“Genesia**

[exactly as before]

Tour?

The STAGE MANAGER as “Domenico”

In the years since you forsook it, the Autumn Theatre has devolved into a sort of . . .
 “shrine,” I was about to say, but better: a sort of “theme park,” where twice daily, thrice
 on Sundays, the reverent or merely curious may follow in the footsteps of St. Genesisia at
 the moment of her . . . following in the footsteps. Here each pilgrim/tourist in turn may
 reach down from yon étagère, crack open upon yon escritoire, and turn over onto yon
 credenza even that very book from which long ago you read off—

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as “Genesisia”

Stay! Are you telling me that the book in which I once read and would now again read
 my next move is all this while since—

The STAGE MANAGER

[as himself]

—Here your Predecessor would shift gaze rapidly from stepladder to side table to
 sawhorse.

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as “Genesisia”

I don’t see it. Put my book in my hand.

[as herself]

Actually, I don’t see it. Am I not slated to come upon the book just about—

The STAGE MANAGER

[as himself, *very loudly, as if seeking to be heard in the
 last row and inmost recesses of the theatre*]

—BREAK!

[The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS instantly resumes her position from opening, seated on the stage floor with legs straight out before her, face in lap, hair tumbling forward onto ribbed rehearsal skirt.]

That's exactly the pose your Predecessor invariably fell into on break. Honestly, there are moments when I feel I'm back working with *her*.

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS

It was, I assume, just here that my Predecessor became my Predecessor.

[The STAGE MANAGER looks puzzled.]

I mean, that you called "Break!" precisely at the moment of my Predecessor's mid-performance walkout.

The STAGE MANAGER

Well, no, actually, it was a little further on in the scene that your Predecessor lit out for the territories, having by then come on the missing book, opened, read, and—

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS

Yes, now about that missing book: this would, I take it, have the character of—

The STAGE MANAGER

Unspecified.

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS

Well, but surely some type of tractate or treatise, since back then it put her in the path and she now looks for it to put her back on the path—

The STAGE MANAGER

Just some book off the shelf of some countryhouse library, containing words that, opened to at random, might conceivably send somebody hurtling out the door— Anything else?

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS

It would help to know if Genesisia and Domenico are actually ex-lovers.

The STAGE MANAGER

It's been played differently in different productions. Brisbane made them out to be a couple of long standing. In Malaga they were portrayed as just on the cusp. And someplace, I forget where, it helped the Genesisia to imagine her rendez-vous "by the leaf-choked well" as being with—Domenico.

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS

But here? With us? Where along the spectrum did our Domenico and my Predecessor—

The STAGE MANAGER

Do you know, you sometimes sound more interested in taking over the "role" of your Predecessor than that of Genesisia.

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS

Is it not my Predecessor whom I have been engaged to replace?

The STAGE MANAGER

In the role of Genesisia.

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS

To be sure. But as I am certain, on some other occasion, to be someone *else's* predecessor, were I not best pay heed to how it's done? Meantime, I must say, it's hard being the only one.

The STAGE MANAGER

The only . . . ?

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS

Replacement, I mean, in this sea of original cast members.

The STAGE MANAGER

What makes you suppose—?

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS

Do you mean, there are others?

The STAGE MANAGER

The theatre giveth and the theatre taketh away. Pretty much our entire company, at this point, are replacements.

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS

Up through and including—?

The STAGE MANAGER

No one bides very long in the role of Genesisia.

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS

And in the role of Stage Manager?

The STAGE MANAGER

This promptbook, I promise you, has passed from hand to hand. It's the theatre, child: everyone's in-for-somebody. Were you not but now musing on the moment when, inevitably, the mantle of predecessor should devolve upon—?

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS

At which juncture, surely, it will be asked of me what now I— *Player, how play you this?* As seamless transition? Uneasy handing over? Fundamental breach?

The STAGE MANAGER

Actor's choice. Trust me, it all grows clearer as one soldiers on to the undreamt of, unparalleled— Speaking of which . . .

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS

That wasn't much of a break.

The STAGE MANAGER

Think of it as a pushing forward by other means. So, to pick up where we (never really) left off:

[He helps her to her feet and they reassume their pre-Break (p. 11) positions.]

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as “**Genesisia**”

Put my book in my hand!

The STAGE MANAGER as “**Domenico**”

If you are looking to reread and thereby recapture—

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as “**Genesisia**”

What may abide of faith on a second reading? No, rather, let me turn the page and learn what is next for me.

The STAGE MANAGER as “**Domenico**”

Take up your reading scene where since abrupted? But, as I have sought and sought to convey, the Autumn Theatre, being on more or less permanent hiatus—

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS as “**Genesisia**”

In which, I seek only to take my place. Put my book in my hand and I am out the door!

The STAGE MANAGER as “**Domenico**”

Got to be somewhere on the scene, haven’t I been known to dip into it myself from time to time? Just at the moment, though, I seem unable to put my finger on—

[as himself]

Actually, I do appear temporarily to have lost track of— Well, it can’t have wandered far; weren’t we just now blocking you into your Act I business with it? Here, let me see if I can’t—

[The STAGE MANAGER sets down the promptbook on the “credenza” (sawhorse), drops to his knees, and launches into an exhaustive, systematic search for the “missing book” that takes him around, amid and beneath the dummy furniture.]

The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS watches for a time, then goes over to the “credenza,” lifts away the promptbook, and begins leafing through it.]

The STAGE MANAGER

[as he searches]

You earlier expressed some curiosity as to the exact moment of your Predecessor’s taking off for parts unknown.

[The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS gently shuts the promptbook, closes her eyes, cracks open the promptbook at random, opens her eyes, and lets her gaze fall upon the page she has opened to.]

Well, let me tell you, it was just here—

[The REPLACEMENT ACTRESS slams shut the promptbook, clasps it to her bosom, and urgently exits.]

—*just here*—that your Predecessor became your—

[The STAGE MANAGER looks up from his search and registers that the REPLACEMENT ACTRESS and the promptbook are no longer onstage.]

He pulls a phone out of his pocket, dials, and speaks:]

Hello, stage management here. I am calling to order up another— Yes. I know you only just, but I’m afraid she already has— A replacement of the— Exactly.

*[He hangs up and sits down on a lower rung of the
étagère/stapladder to await the replacement of the
REPLACEMENT.*

1, 2 . . . the light goes down.]

SUCH ENDING AS

