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## *Working in the Theater with Robert Penn Warren*

AARON FRANKEL

In November, 1958, as the new Artistic Director of the Margo Jones Theater in Dallas, Texas, I produced and directed a stage adaptation of Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, called *Willie Stark, His Rise and Fall*. I had started collaborating on it with Mr. Warren four years earlier.

This was the fourth version of the story. But let Robert Penn Warren himself provide the details of that, from the Playwright's Column he wrote for the 1958 Margo Jones Theater program:

This play is new, and it is old.

It is old in the sense that it is the last, and I trust the final, form of a piece of work I began twenty years ago [1938]. Then, as a teacher at the Louisiana State University, I was a fascinated observer of that instructive melodrama which was Louisiana politics; and very naturally I began to ponder a play about a back-country dictator.

My dictator, I decided, could not be merely a man who by force or fraud had come to power. Such a story would have no "insides"—no inner drama. No, my man had to be, in one sense, an idealist caught in the corrupting process by his own gift for power.

Into that notion flowed other notions, and the play got started—a verse play. It was finished in Rome, in the winter of 1939-40, while the boot heels of Mussolini's legionnaires clanged on the cobbles.

That play, *Proud Flesh*, got finished but I laid it aside, showing it only to a few friends. I wanted to let it get cool before I did a final revision. Meanwhile I worked on something else. Then when I did get back to *Proud Flesh*, what I found myself doing was not revising the play but starting a novel out of the same material.

Well, in the fullness of time, that novel, *All the King's Men*, got finished, too, and before too long there was the temptation to dramatize the novel. I succumbed to the temptation, but in trying to dramatize the novel I found myself, by the logic of the contrast between dramatic form and fictional form, re-interpreting, re-thinking, shifting emphases. This play, called *All the King's Men*, went out into the world. [It was produced, directed and designed by Erwin Piscator at his New School Dramatic Workshop in 1948.]

Some years and several books later a young man named Aaron Frankel called on me. He wanted, he said, to talk about directing a play—*All the King's Men*. So I got out the script and we talked. Talk led to more

talk, and in the end what we had was not a revision of *All the King's Men*, but a new play, *Willie Stark: His Rise and Fall*.

There is a moral to this story. If you begin to alter, however casually, a form—which was what Aaron Frankel and I started out to do—you are bound in the end to alter meaning. For form is meaning. That is the moral to this story—an old moral, but one that I had been relearning in my long association with Willie Stark.

Yes, that is the question, the one of form. Robert Penn Warren left, of course, a huge mark on American literature. But I have always regretted that Warren did not work longer or more often in the American Theater. What a loss! For his insight into the theater was unique and original, a native American style a-borning. The only similar visions of the stage are Bertolt Brecht's in his "alienating" way and Thornton Wilder's in his didactic way. But Warren's I find is truer and fresher. He ignored the "fourth wall" in the most natural way.

His characters relate as directly to the audience as to each other—that is, the actors "narrate" as well as "play" their roles, much as we do when we tell a story to friends. On cues supplied by Warren, they will step outside the action of the story to observe, comment on and justify themselves to us. The illusion on the stage, while still sought after, counts only so long as the characters may argue about its meaning, making not merely the stage but audience and entire theater into a tribunal, a forum.

Ten years later in 1968, at the Glenn Hughes Playhouse at the University of Washington, I produced and directed another verse play by Robert Penn Warren, *Brother to Dragons*, about blood-drenched secrets in the family history of Thomas Jefferson. It moved back and forth in time. Warren was still wrestling with form. In his own words, from the program for that production:

In one sense, the time is any time. That is, in our presence now, the living Writer and the long-dead Jefferson confront events in the distant past, re-enacted by members of Jefferson's own family.

The events re-enacted occurred, historically, in Kentucky in 1810 to 1812.

As, in one sense, the action is outside of time, so it is outside of place, and occurs only in the imagination. This is only a way of saying that the issue confronted seems to be a human constant.

Collaborating on *Willie Stark* with Warren produced its own double edge. He, the writer, searching out his vision of the play for the stage, suggested most of the directing ideas; I, the director, culling all the source material, suggested most of the writing ideas.

We began work in the second best way, by letters, four years before the Margo Jones opening. Then, sporadically, we began working in the best way, in person. That became more frequent, and by the last spring and summer prior to production, almost steady. We also became friends.

Red, as I got to know him, lived then in Fairfield, Connecticut, with his wife, Eleanor Clark, author of *Rome and a Villa* and other works, and their two young children, Rosanna and Gabriel. I would take the train up from New York and Red would pick me up at the station. We would stop off for grocery shopping on the way back to his house, then go out to work in the big backyard. The interchange was active but easy, searching but warm.

One time after lunch the afternoon also got warm, and Red dozed off. I, a city boy, got up and studied the backyard. I need to add here that Red had another and personal double edge. He had a machine gun Southern drawl that took some getting used to. Of course, when he awoke, the machine gun picked right up.

Once we had to work on very short notice in my apartment in New York. My wife had only franks and beans on hand for lunch. Red treated it as if it were the Waldorf Astoria.

I had seen that 1948 Piscator production and I remember being very taken by it. I wanted to direct it somewhere myself, with brash thoughts that I could also improve on it. Six years later I was guest directing at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., and thought after my first show there I had found a place to do *All the King's Men* at last. Well, that didn't work out, as such things go. But it got me in touch with Warren. Here are the first exchanges<sup>1</sup>:

February 18, 1954

Dear Mr. Frankel,

I am glad that, as Helen Strauss [Warren's literary agent] has just informed me, you all are doing *All the King's Men*. But can you let me know which of the two versions you are using, the verse one (old title, *Proud Flesh*) or the prose one that Piscator did? My question is prompted by a little more than curiosity. This past fall, in preparing the manuscript for what now seems to be an assured London production (I say this with fingers crossed) I did a bit of revising on the verse version, and if that is your script I'd like to incorporate my new notions. Likewise, if you are doing the other I'd like to get some new notions in .... Anyway, the Piscator version was never finished. I had a sailing date and just went off and left it. And now I'd like to take another look. Can you let me have a copy of your text, whichever it is? I'd be very grateful.

Goodbye, and regards.

Robert Penn Warren

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February 23, 1954

Dear Mr. Warren,

Thank you very much for your letter. Having just gotten your address from Miss Strauss, I was on the verge of writing you.

I'd like to say first how delighted and excited we are at the prospect of doing *All the King's Men*, and how getting your letter further encouraged us. I saw the Piscator production when it was done some years back, and I still remember the exciting potential that it held for me. It's gratifying to work on the play myself now. I'm ... more than grateful for your interest in working further.

Now, the problem of the text is a poser. I found myself with four versions, when we finally got them all rounded up from the various sources. Two are verse versions (one incomplete), and two are prose. Going over them, and then going back to the novel, I found things I admired in all of them.

I therefore took upon myself the task of making a kind of adaptation which would incorporate into a new whole virtues now scattered among all the originals—without presuming to write a single line of my own. This of course became a major enterprise.... It was at this point that I was going to write to appeal for your help and guidance.

... My intention at all points, however, is first to preserve and fulfill your purposes as I understand them, and second, to evolve a script which will have its own proper unity, form and effect.

... I hope that you will also understand that this “adaptation” represents only my own momentary, provisional and modestly submitted thoughts toward the play in its final working out, ...and I defer at all points to your judgment and interest.

... I should like to propose ... that I then visit you in Fairfield (my home is New York) at your convenience, if you feel that more could be accomplished by some old-fashioned sitting around to shoot the ducks on the pond than by mail ....

I hope we can meet ... so that there will be good time ... to get back into rehearsal down here and find out the things that only rehearsals and audiences can tell us ....

Going back to the novel was a wonderful experience all over again .... We feel honored and delighted to participate in bringing *All the King's Men* once more back to the stage. Our thanks again.

With high hopes and every good wish,

Sincerely,  
Aaron Frankel

P.S. If you want a copy of the play in its present form anyway I shall be glad to send it along, verse or prose version. However, it was Robert Giroux at Harcourt, Brace in New York who sent them to us, and I assume he could also supply you copies.

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March 1, 1954

Dear Mr. Frankel,

You certainly are doing it the hard way, but I shan't discourage you, for it will come out to my profit. That is, I don't feel that the thing is finished and your work will certainly turn up some valuable things for me. It will be fine to see you when you are ready. If we leave the country this spring, it will not be, I am sure, until the middle of April.

Best regards, and thanks.

Sincerely yours,  
Robert Penn Warren

I took Warren at his word and plunged on. My next letter was an outline eleven single-spaced pages long! I have condensed the first quarter of it to indicate how in one way our collaboration proceeded.

March 16, 1954

Dear Mr. Warren,

Thank you for your gracious note. With every intention of answering it more promptly, I found I had to delay until the present moment.

... First of all, you were dead right when you said I was doing it the hard way. Second, I found myself rehearsing ... on a continually changing schedule for the [next] show ....

I note, however, that you expect to leave for London about the middle of April. Not incidentally, good luck on the London production! On the possibility that a visit from me would not fit in with your plans that late at all, I thought it might be best to send along at least an outline of what I've done so far (half-way through Act II), and an outline of the remainder still to be done ....

As far as the outline goes, it's pretty much a matter of reorganizing the material .... I find I most admire the novel. Therefore within the play itself I find myself continually going back to the novel for the actual dramatization of scenes. The basic form that I'm following is that of the prose version. The basic material, the meat of the scenes, is from the novel. Then I'm incorporating a few elements, largely as counterpoint (though not exactly in the same way you used a Chorus), from the verse version.

I realize that using the novel can be misleading. But it seems to me that there are certain distinct advantages. For one thing I find that in the novel versions of the same scenes which appear in the play, there are immediate and tremendous inner impulses in the scenes which drive the story forward.

One of my objections to the Piscator version is that it seems to me the "bridges"—the stretches of discussion between Jack and the Professor—are used to move the story from point to point, ignoring or sometimes even cutting out the elements within the scenes themselves which lead them progressively from one to another.

Secondly, though not second at all, the wealth of characterization and revelation seems to me readily adaptable to the stage, at once dramatic and rich. Once again, the Piscator version skeletonized the story far too much, and against the play's best interest, which is exactly the complexity and the irony the novel captures. What I am saying, in a word, is that the novel seems to me remarkably and singularly adaptable to the stage in many of its scenes and that the main work in such instances is not "translation" but editing ....

One central problem in making a play of the novel I have found paramount, however. In the novel Jack Burden it seems to me is the central focus and this works because the novel form allows you to develop the story out of Jack's introspection. This, however, is not as easy to apply on the stage. Here one of my main suggestions

occurs.

I think in the play Willie Stark should be the character in central focus, that the movement of the story from point to point has to come through his action .... In the book, part of the point is that all main characters in one way or another—Jack, Adam, Anne, Lucy, Sadie, Duffy, even the Judge—take their action and their definition from Willie. This seems to me to lend itself ... admirably to the claim that Willie should be more clearly the focus of the play. I now find an ambiguity, a shift of focus between Jack and Willie which I think weakens the dramatic potential.

For all these reasons my impulse has been to cut down greatly on the scene “bridges,” and their “labels.” You shall have to judge whether I am right or wrong on this score, or missing more important considerations.

Similarly, I feel the Prologue could be more organically related to the story. I think its situation could be more integrated and more [theatrically] realized .... The central event of the plot [is] the building of the hospital—this I think provides an excellent hinge for the story to turn on, and we should have it clearly, constantly and centrally in focus before us ....

I should interject a brief discussion of the set for the play .... Whatever its general design elements, I suggest it include two platforms. One would be a bandstand platform ... and the other a platform for the appearance of people out of time (e.g., those dead) ... available all through.

Thus, we start [on the bandstand] at the hospital [dedication] ... Jack challenges Shipworth from the audience. Adam appears on the out-of-time platform. Anne appears from the same part of the audience as Jack (being now his wife). Duffy, Sadie, Lucy, Larson, Sugar-Boy appear in turn from different parts of the audience. Judge Irwin and Willie, like Adam, appear separately on the out-of-time platform ... leading to the introduction of “I’ll tell you how that hospital came to be built!”

Now we come to Act I, Scene 1. Another new and wild suggestion. I think the first scene within the play ought to be the Byram B. White scene from the book, edited merely to fit the facts we will use in the play .... The scene leads quite naturally to two basic (and motivating) facts, Lucy’s leaving Willie and Willie’s resolve to build the hospital ....

Another and almost stronger reason for starting this way: Here, strong and true (as Hemingway would say) we start right out with Willie in action .... And we immediately begin to use one of the main questions the book raises, the creation of good out of evil ....

I then condense, in terms of organization, the next three scenes into one .... It still remains in three parts, first outside Judge Irwin’s, then inside, then back outside again, but they all flow directly from one to another, which can also be managed set-wise. Here I also inserted several speeches ... putting [more of] the meat of the novel back on the skeleton of the Piscator play-version. The third part of the scene would be the only one, obviously, that needs adjustment .... That’s editing and easy: we keep the section where Stark tells Jack to dig on Irwin.

The rest of my outline of Act I went on in the same detailed vein, and it continued that way right through the half-way point I had reached in Act II; actually, it got even

more detailed, suggesting even more reorganizing, while remaining contingent, provisional. Left were a couple of observations:

Perhaps I should make explicit that .... I think Piscator's intention, while off the track in execution, was right in general direction. There is a strong journalistic vein in *All the King's Men*, though of a high order, and I think the play would be best cast in the mold of a documentary. I myself see the form of the play coming out of such combined roots as the *Living Newspaper* style of the Federal Theater of the Thirties and the rapid-fire, audience-centered style of the Group Theater's *Waiting for Lefty*. And into a "new form, new form" of its own, in the words of Trepleff .... It must not mean at all that the scenes themselves in the play should be treated only as events and not also for character, relationships, atmosphere or spirit. Piscator's error, I feel, was to single out only the event .... A documentary can also be substantial.

I'd like ... to make clear something [else] .... Actually, you don't deal in "flashbacks" [in the novel]. You stop time, if I may put it that way, and I'd love to find the theatrical equivalent for that [in the play].

... I must offer apologies for my typing and correcting along the way; I trust this has not been too difficult to read .... If I am on the wrong track ... I shall not be afraid for you to tell me so ....

Of course, the spirit more than the details of "having my long say" to Warren was what carried over to the final adaptation that became *Willie Stark: His Rise and Fall*.

Meanwhile, at the same time I was mailing my long account to him, he was mailing a short accounting to me.

March 17, 1954

Dear Aaron,

Here is the manuscript of the play. Hell broke loose here, including trouble about the typing, and just this morning it has been finished. I have made a few small revisions along the way and I'm sure we'll want to make others. For the moment all I now propose is attached herewith. POSSIBLE substitution for II-1-19 and II-1-20. I felt that this might set up Anne's situation a little more clearly. If you agree with this, will you draw out the old pages now in place and insert these? If you don't approve, hang on to them anyway. I have no copies.

Also, you had better run through the MS to see that all pages are in order. I did that this morning but with three children howling about my knees—one of my own children and two of the typist's.

We got a pretty good rate on the typing: \$45. It is not wonderful and I had to correct about fifty pages, but it is as competent as most around here. The bill for the other version was \$29.50. I'm just putting this down now to keep the record. If you will let me know what the cost of the photographing is, then I will send you the amount. Let me pay all now, and then we can work out proportionate costs at the end. That will save confusion, I think.



ALSO—over and above our six copies, I shall need an extra for other purposes, seven in all. Will you remember that, please sir?

Well, Lord love us!

Yours,  
Red

*Brother to Dragons* went through a similar process of collaboration, sometimes perforce by letter, sometimes, praise be, in person, also over several years, and in several stages.

The story centers on an appalling crime committed by Lilburn Lewis, nephew to Thomas Jefferson: Lilburn's butcher murder of a young Negro plantation slave. In the known record, Jefferson never referred to the crime of his nephew—Warren's "convenient" seed for his theme. Jefferson, prophet of human perfectibility and American independence, is brought back to cry out in the twentieth century the words of Job (30:29): "I am a brother to dragons and a companion to owls." He of all men must discover that there is a terror, a primordial lurking, the minotaur in waiting, in all men. It is in the family, *in the blood*, even of Thomas Jefferson, American original of the Enlightenment, and he must acknowledge the terrible responsibility of it. It is the dark human condition.

It is also in the blood of the South. It fills *All the King's Men*, which also contains the beautiful long parable of the Mastern brothers. That is the same story, of good and evil. It seems at first irrelevant, until we realize that it is in allegory form the history of the South. The same may be said of the complete novel, *World Enough an Time*—Jeremiah Beaumont's high and fatal chivalry becomes an agony of emptiness.

Toward the end of *Brother to Dragons* the crowning story of Meriwether Lewis is introduced—Meriwether, first cousin to Lilburn Lewis, and in turn principal in a violent death (possibly, murder, more poetically, suicide). Yes, this is that Meriwether Lewis, once Jefferson's White House secretary, who was leader with William Clark of the Louisiana Purchase expedition, later Governor of the Louisiana Territory. He is not essential to the story of *Brother to Dragons* but is essential to its theme. Meriwether and Lilburn are both types of the Southern experience. Warren is telling the story of the South in every instance. And that story revolves around his primary subject, if not obsession. Confronted by evil, good must be created out of it. It is the definition of a man.

Robert Penn Warren represents an exemplar of the Southern apprehension that the light is small and the dark is wide and bloody, that our nature is violence and depravity and doom. I do not claim that only Southern writers are possessed by this, nor that all of them are. But they seem to me its most eloquent exponents. A Hemingway may acknowledge the beast in us but retorts, "find an outlet for it so it won't devour you." Southern writers tend to cultivate the lust for violence, pain, and darkness as inborn, permanent, dominant, inescapable, from generation to generation. Sin is original with man (indeed). In Warren it is more than an idea, it is felt, a stench, an intuition made fact by belief. Goodness is only a hope. Evil is a conviction. It even becomes a principle, a cause.

The journey of *Brother to Dragons* to the University of Washington took twelve years and went through several stages, or better, straits. The very first should have been an omen. *Brother to Dragons* was originally conceived as a narrative poem, *A Tale in*

*Verse and Voices*—not as a play. *Willie Stark* at least had the benefit of three rich prior sources, two of them in play form. Translating *Brother to Dragons* into a play took a prodigious effort.

Then there were early production prospects at Yale, where Red was still teaching but about to resign, and at newly opened Brandeis, where I had begun double duty, teaching and running the Theater Workshop. For various reasons, neither production got on. When I heard from Red again, he wrote, in passing, “I have resigned from Yale, and shall undertake to make an honest living. At least, I have dropped my academic alibi.” Later he wrote from the American Academy at Rome, “commodiously put up” there with Eleanor and the children:

... The script as it now stands needs, as you know, more work, particularly in the opening section. And the use of [Meriwether] Lewis has to be thought through again. I had hoped to talk this out with you, when I get back .... I feel that the thing is basically there and the revision should be done, for the most part, after a couple of stand-up readings, and in consultation .... Gosh, I hope it works out ... for one reason because it would be a pleasure to work with you again ....

For the record, this is the first time doing rewrites out of script readings came up as a way of working. It is sometimes a useful way, but it never proved applicable in this case.

I next found New York co-producers, and sought others. Periodic revisions with Red never stopped. All of us knew *Brother to Dragons* was a long shot, “the sort of thing,” Red wrote, “that is harder to get on.” All of us were right.

So the final and climactic phase of putting *Brother to Dragons* on a stage arrived when I was able at last to take it to The Glenn Hughes Playhouse at the University of Washington, across the country in Seattle. Resuming revisions for that production also reached a climactic stage.

There was one difference all along, however, from working on *Willie Stark*. This was not a writing collaboration but one between playwright and director, a more customary procedure. Otherwise, again separated by circumstances beyond our control, we fell back on exchanging letters and phone calls (sometimes hectically). One face-to-face meeting mid-way was all we managed.

November 22, 1967

Dear Red,

... Had the first reading yesterday. Wow! The power really comes through. I was very lifted, so was the cast. Hope we can live up to it.

I have to report one strange problem, so ironic, and a product of the inflammations of this year of I hope our Lord, 1967. Negroes don't want to play Negroes. I have been able to cast Aunt Cat, after dithering some, but that's now okay. Must still get to a John [the young plantation slave]. What happened in sum was that a choice came up: either cut the rest of the Negro ensemble or abandon the play. I couldn't take any more abandonments. I've worked out a way of doing the show with implicit effects [shadow-play] rather than explicit bodies, and I hope I can make them work. But I need a word or two from you. The scene most affected is the “dem bones” scene, which

I'd like to find an appropriate way to keep.

Well, to answer your question, I will be home early for the recess, the week of December 11, in fact. May I call you then? ...

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January 14, 1968

Dear Red,

It was a deep pleasure to see you in New York .... In a few days or so, I hope to send off a script with the cuts I've so far made ....

I've otherwise followed our old *Willie Stark* method, meaning that I've avoided writing a single line of my own, and every word left is yours only. I've done this with transpositions, sometimes (not often) with whole speeches, or parts of a speech, or lines or parts of lines, and trying always to keep what I can sense is your metrical desire as well as the best acting answer .... Trouble is, I think I still need more cuts, because I fear [Act I] is still too long by ten minutes or more, and [also at the end], once Lilburn has been shot ....

The confrontation of the Writer and Jefferson bears the play's significance for me and I hope for the audience, and I guess that's what I'm trying to heighten in all the cuts I've made. One thing that's fun is getting Jefferson in close physical contact on stage with all the "family scenes"—to keep him, in other words, as much in the audience's eye at all times no matter what's happening ....

My other main problem has been working without the Negro ensemble, and in fact my first attempt to apply the solution we worked out in New York went astray. This was mainly because I didn't do it simply and directly enough, I think, and I hope yesterday's change in rehearsal solves that.

If when you get the edited script you have any further suggestions for cuts, or any corrections of what I've done, please holler ....

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January 28, 1968

Dear Red,

Well, here it is [the script]—not as soon as I'd liked, but still in time, I hope, for any corrections you want to make, or any advice I may still need to call you for, before the February 5<sup>th</sup> opening.

... I have in fact made a couple of further cuts ... but I still find the first act running an hour and fifteen minutes, and the second act fifty minutes .... My feeling about the first act is not merely the 75 minutes themselves: the material is so loaded that I'm worried about exhausting the audience's emotional response too early, before we reach the first act curtain and, worse, before we get past the event [the butcher murder] to its Act II significance. I think the play's marvelous—but it's strenuous!

Gotta say, some of these cuts have hurt .... Lord knows I've wished you were on hand for this, and maybe another production can come out of this we could share hammer and anvil on. One interesting lesson, though: working this way sure teaches one to exhaust every

acting and staging solution before going hollering to the playwright for rewrites ....

I do know a chunk I could take out of Act I. It occurred to me only this weekend. It would be the whole Big Court Day sequence, dance included (I-18 to I-22), and probably save 5 minutes worth. But I hesitate to do it for a couple of reasons. Even though all its information appears in some form elsewhere, it provides a welcome change of pace, even a needed one, and balances the act in a very helpful way. It would also mean depriving the five or six ensemble kids (who've worked hard) of their main appearance in the show, plus losing the musical and dance background that's been worked in, brief though it be. "Out of town" I'd be interested to see what would happen if it were cut—but not here.

As I look the script over one final time, I wonder how much I've done will justify itself to you, or seem right at all. Some line adjustments and cuts were for actor's benefit, certainly—but the proportion of these is small. How more than ever I wish you could see the show itself in its present form, to see for real if it's the way you want, on its feet .... Meanwhile, I hope to heaven I've gotten it right ....

The show opened, to play its allotted two weeks. In the program was an insert:

Brother to Dragons is a new play. We are therefore making continuous adaptations in script and performance.

March 10, 1968

Dear Red,

The crazy press of things out here has delayed my writing you about the run of *Brother to Dragons* here .... I talked to [audience] kids: I think the play spoke to them most of all, and that pleases me greatly.

Which is to say in general that I was very happy to do the show and proud of the results. Yes, the play had mixed reactions, including extreme ones. The negatives disappointed me, of course, but did not surprise me. We kept working on the production, par for a new play, of course, and made acting and staging adjustments and continual script cuts right up to closing night.

The closing version was I think as tight as I could ever get the script without the benefit of your personal editing. I enclose the pages which contain all further cuts as a result of performances: everything in red pencil. I should add that the shape of the final ten pages or so came about experimentally in several stages, whereas I'm sending you only its final stage. (It assumed this shape only the final two nights, and played itself properly only the closing night.)

It represents ... probably the most radical alteration of all .... The main impulse was that once Lilburn was shot the curtain kept pressing to come down. I therefore tried to get to all the wind-ups as completely and quickly as possible, and the action (and meaning) seemed to carry for the audience in natural dramatic terms and needed a minimum amount of words ....

You'll note, doubtless, that the main performance revisions involved further cuts for Jefferson and the Writer. That always remained the heart of the problem, for me, of making the play work. (Even one or

two line cuts seemed to help, as well as “chunks.”) It would also remain the heart of any future version of the play, were that ever in view. Thinking most radically, maybe the Writer could be cut after all .... Maybe the confrontation should be between Jefferson and Lilburn all through .... As you can see, I’m still fascinated by *Brother to Dragons*.

Thankfully, concerning the Writer versus Jefferson as framework for the play, I obviously got desperate but never that radical, and wrong. For I’d have gone conventional, and missed the boat completely. I’d have lost sight of what Robert Penn Warren brought uniquely to the American theater: a new form for the stage where actors “play” and “narrate” their roles at one and the same time, in elemental irony.

This double edge, this paradox of Robert Penn Warren, never ceased taking form, either: enlightened and haunted, courtly and driven, engaged and fragmented, cosmopolitan and Southern. It permeates his characters as well. Heightened knowledge meets deepened self-criticism. If struggle is the burden, self-awareness is the gain.

In Warren, time and place are re-invented, to reveal anew. Time is stopped, to fill it in. Place is framed, to make it moral more than physical. And they keep changing with every change that actor and beholder undergo. The meaning is in the form.

Full circle. What the American theater might have been, if only Red Warren had taken greater part in it!

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<sup>1</sup> The letters cited in this essay are with the kind permission of the Aaron Frankel Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.