

# KAREN'S KORNER

## A Brother of the Arts Mixes Up the Images



By KAREN BRADY

NIAGARA FALLS, March 9 — I don't know what you were doing during the last solar eclipse of the century Saturday — but I was ensconced in a sort of a cellar with a Socratean soul, name of Brother Augustine Towey, CM.

Brother Augustine was experiencing "a morning after." He was smoking a lot, calling out droll "nothings" at friends who past, glowering at a wall phone that kept on ringing and harriedly, but happily, entertaining everyone who'd pulled up chairs around him.

"They've had it already in Mexico. The eclipse," he observed at one point, shuffling back from a brief phone call. No one even asked if the call had come from Mexico: It was just the sort of thing that might happen to Brother Augustine.

He is, formally speaking, the life, stage, literature and film-loving Vincentian who founded Niagara University's annual Festival of the Arts five years ago and has run it ever since.

ALMOST EVERYONE thinks of him informally though — as a somewhat monkish-looking brother, slightly retound, slightly balding, just the sort who might emerge from a well-stocked medieval wine cellar.

Some days, he strolls across the Niagara campus in his clerical black garb and a peace medallion or pair of red love-heads. Other days they say, he wears other symbols and chants all sorts of things, leading, like Socrates or the Pied Piper, a string of students behind him.

"No one," he told me without affectation Saturday, "really knows what to make of me. Not the faculty, the students, even some theater people: They have pre-ordained ideas of what Vincentian brothers and the stage and directors of drama should be. I mix up all their images."

I didn't know what to make of Brother Augustine either, in his black loafers and socks and suit and glasses. A royal blue pen, though, in his pocket, and his white clerical collar lying on a copy of the Saturday Review on the table before him.

"GOING TO SEE the eclipse, Brother?" A boy called as he dashed by the table, in the dimly-lit lower level of Niagara's Student Center.

"You're not supposed to LOOK at it," Brother called back, shrugging his shoulders in defeat as the clever student showed him how to put three pieces of glass together and provide a safe filter for sky watching.

It was the morning after the start of the university's fifth Festival of the Arts. It also was the morning after an apparently fantastic opening party, which had been attended for a while by the fragile, aging and famous film star Lillian Gish, and which had ended, toward dawn, with Brother Towey singing at the piano. All the talk was Lillian Gish, who'd begun the 14-days' activities with her now-famous, personal presentation, "Lillian Gish and the Movies."

"It was remarkable, so remarkable," said Brother Augustine to equally-marveling students, "sitting there and watching her, then watching her



BROTHER AUGUSTINE  
A Thesis on Pinter

on screen 30 years ago, and watching her watching herself then too . . ."

SOMEONE SAID that in past years, Brother'd brought Buckminster Fuller and Marshall Mc Luhan and others to the Niagara Festival. And I flipped through a stunning multi-color program of this year's offerings, through March 19, which include, after a mere 30-some-minutes' ride from Buffalo past swift, scenic water and rapids: Several New Cinema screenings, with their makers on hand; the Don Relich Dance Company in Performance (a multi-media presentation); a 43-student, 260-costume, 16-set-changes version of the musical "Mame," directed by Brother Towey, and all sorts of other film, dance and musical productions, with the Asmat Art Collection of Michael Rockefeller, and a poster exhibit on the side. Much of it is free.

Brother Augustine was mentioning something about getting to the first of two rehearsals for "Mame" so we talked rather swiftly about all the events that had brought Brother and his heralded festival to Niagara six and five years ago respectively.

"TOWEY'S AN IRISH name and I was born," he said, simply, with a wink of his sometimes hazel, sometimes green eyes, "in Hempstead, L. I., and went to high school there: Great drama teachers, great music department. It was that easy, I liked theater."

"Then to St. John's University in New York. I directed and acted, character parts and straight roles. Got a bachelor's in English and philosophy and a master's in dramatic literature . . . Then Hofstra for awhile, and England. I have a diploma from the University of Birmingham. I went to its Statford-on-Avon branch. You can ignore the tourists there, for the caliber of the theater . . ."

Brother fished for another cigarette, told someone else not to watch the eclipse except on TV and said he was presently on leave from Niagara ("although ever-present") to complete his doctorate in theater at New York University.

"I commute a lot," he said,

"so I'm able to be back for the festival . . . My thesis is on Pinter. I've corresponded with him: He has such an amazingly cheerful tone in his letters . . . I hope to be back in England for the summer . . ."

"SOME PARTY YOU gave, Brother," a rather long-haired student in a plaid jacket announced, drawing up a chair. Brother Towey combed his own long sideburns with his fingers and just smiled, before talking about his 3½ years' teaching English at St. John's.

"Then," he said, "I entered the Vincentian order. Founded by St. Vincent de Paul. The C M's for Congregation of the Mission. I guess I'm what you'd call a late vocation. But several years later, when I got out, they sent me to Niagara."

Late vacation or not, Brother Towey's only 32 "and very aware of my age." He's teaching a course in acting at Niagara now, and hopes the university will soon put in a drama department. "It's my wish, but not if it has to be in a classroom situation. I never learned a thing in acting classes. Actual production's the only thing that lets you learn."

Someone else said Brother Towey'd written six plays of his own — all of them later produced by colleges, high school, summer stock groups. "Oh yes, I directed some," Brother Towey said abstractedly. "But watching your own play is like seeing a person you know but has changed."

THERE WAS TALK of Brother Augustine admiring Beckett and of course Shakespeare: Last year at the festival he directed "Macbeth" — and the sword scenes were so vividly blocked there were three stabbings, "none of them very serious." Brother said the first festival was "a three-day thing, with a movie and a lecture and a one-act-play contest. Not much compared to today."

With the second festival, the Carborundum Co. of Niagara Falls entered the picture, loaning a fine sculpture exhibit, and eventually helping with the graphics and printing, as well as contributing idea-filled members for the festival's advisory board. About 15,000 attended last year: More are expected this year.

And if you're among them and see a jocular much-beloved fellow in black going around saying "I'm a poor substitute for Lillian Gish," it's probably Brother, actor, director, singer, teacher, Socratean mentor, writer of drama and poetry, and friend to all sorts of eminent authors, poets, dramatists, film-makers and film critics who make Niagara's Festivals of the Arts so sacred.

About the only evil thing I can say about him is that it never occurred to Brother Saturday that I might want to see some of the eclipse.

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