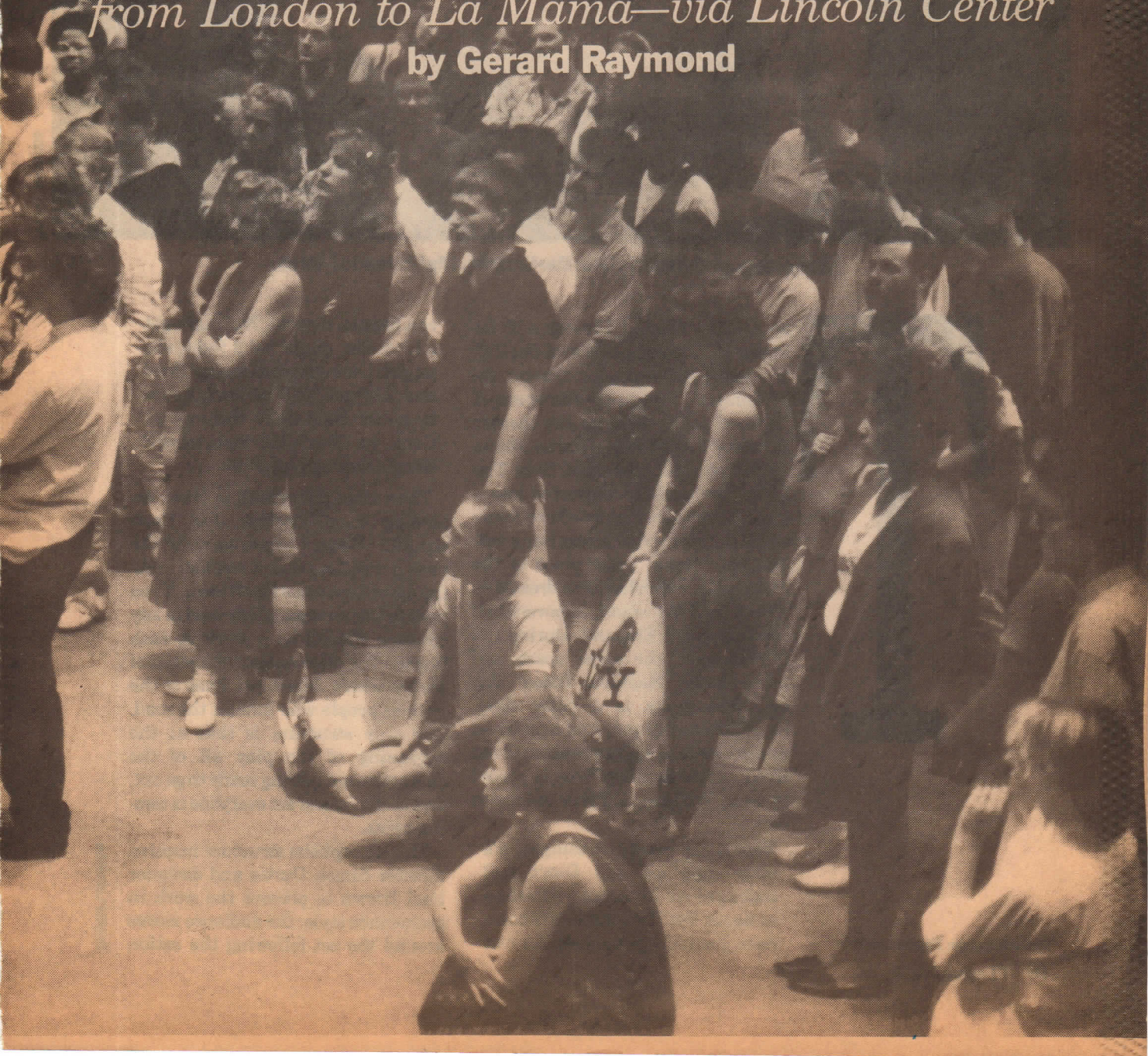
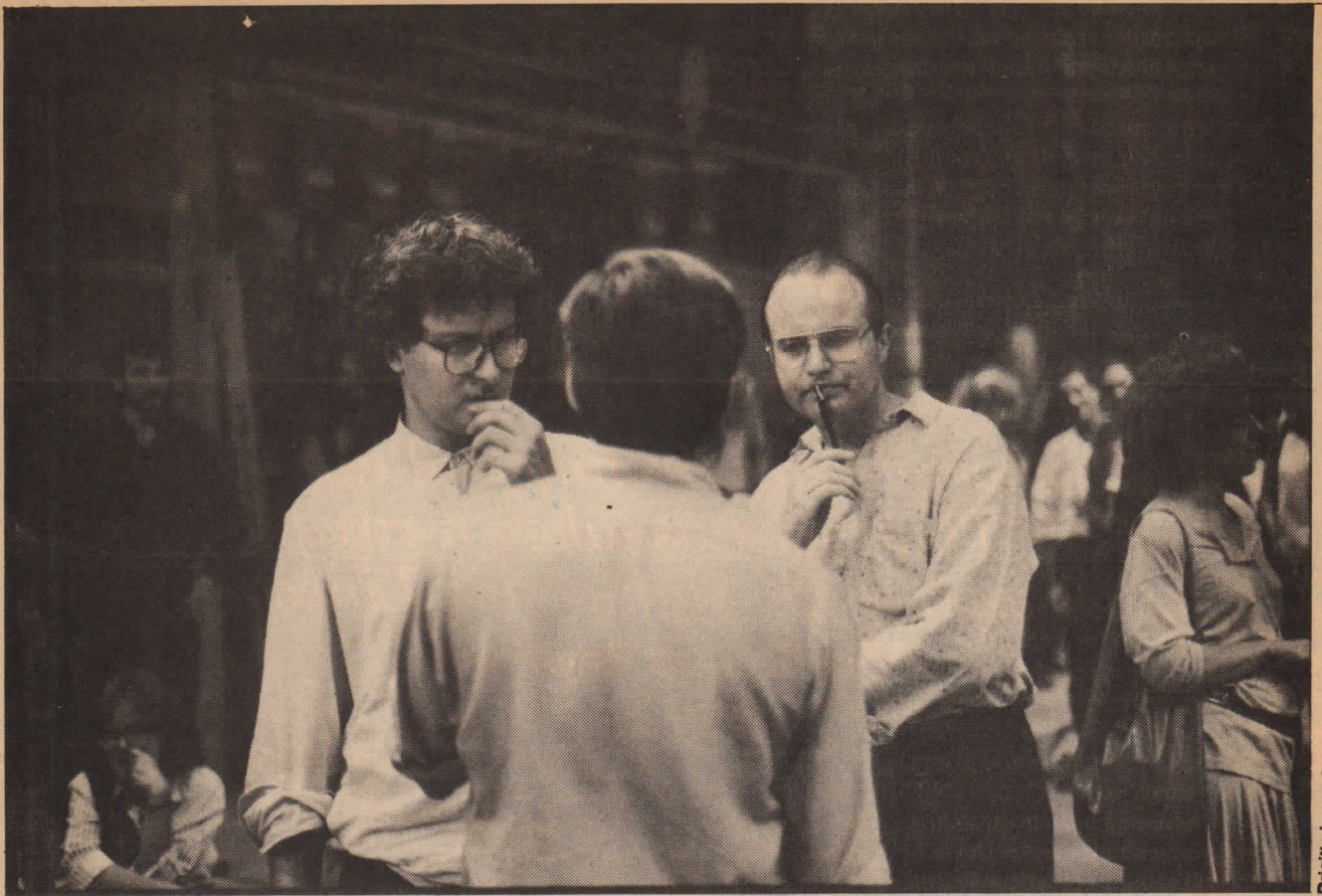


The Road to *Road*

Jim Cartwright's environmental exploration of life under Thatcher has taken a circuitous route from London to La Mama—via Lincoln Center

by Gerard Raymond





Brigitte Lacombe

Above: Simon Curtis and Jim Cartwright. Right: Jayne Hanes.

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he Lincoln Center Theater and La Mama E.T.C. co-production of *Road* offers audiences a unique theater experience in a unique theater space. A pre-show takes place on the theater steps and in the lobby of the La Mama Annex on the Lower East Side. The lobby bar has been converted into a typical Lancashire pub, where many of the evening's characters hang out. The play proper takes place in the main space, which has been dressed as a back road in a small, impoverished town in North England. During the intermission, the same space will serve as the "Beatoven Disco." The evening's guide is a petty thief, neighborhood drunk, and hustler—a nevertheless engaging denizen of the Road named Scullery, who is played by Jack Wallace. Scullery welcomes us:

This is our road! But tonight, it's your road an' all! Don't feel awkward wi' us, make yourselves at home. You'll meet all sorts down here, I'm telling you, love. An 'owt

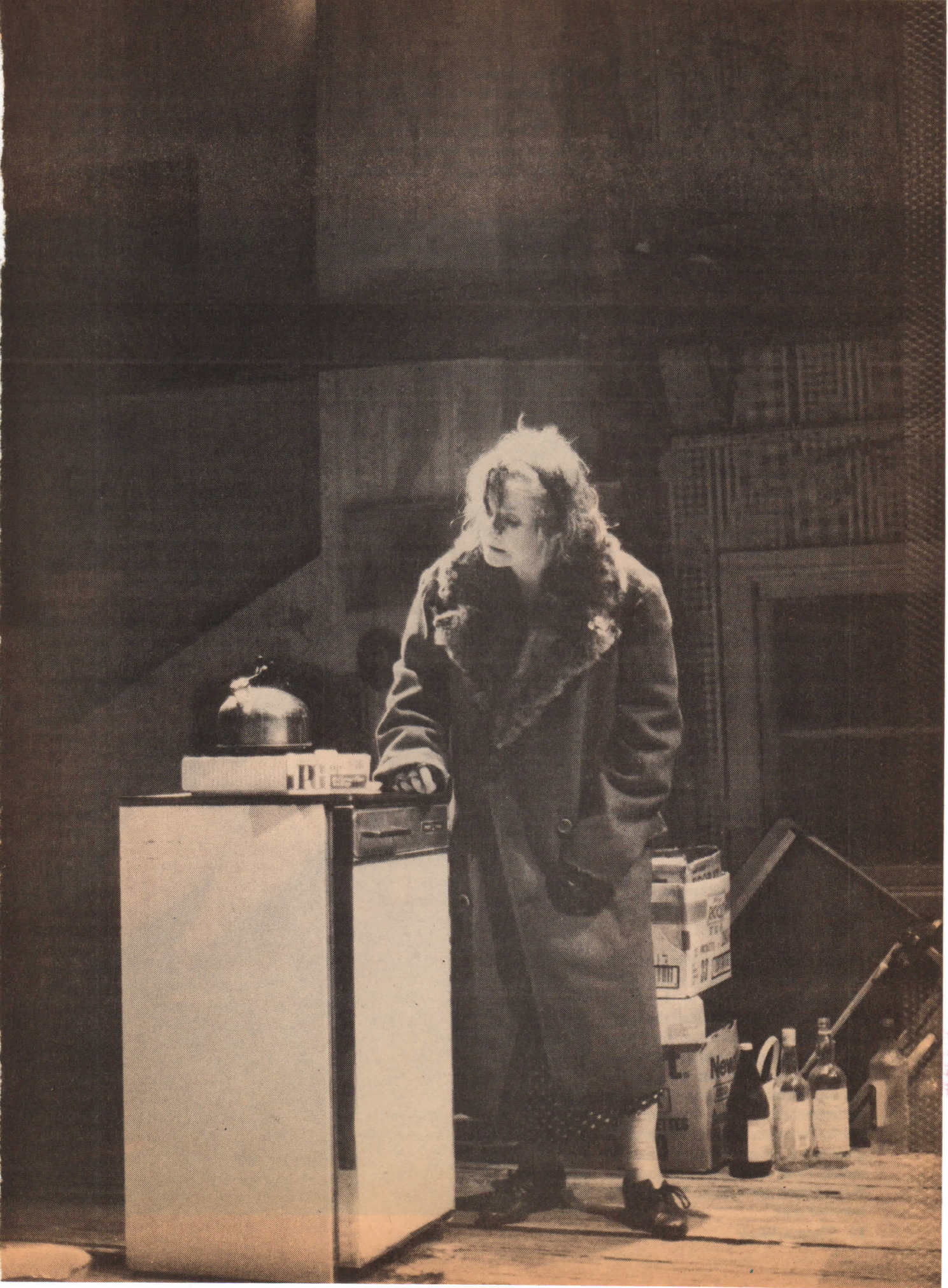
can happen tonight. He might get a bird. She might ha' a fight, she might. Let's shove off down t'Road and find out! We'll go down, house by house. Hold tight. Here we go. Come on. Watch the kerb, missis! Road's coming round us.

There is no plot as such in *Road*. According to playwright Jim Cartwright, "When I began to write the show, I imagined that it was like walking down a road in a small town. If you peep in the curtains of any road in any country, there'll be a story in each house." The play consists of a series of scenes which depict the lives of the various people who inhabit the road. The only structure is that at the beginning of the play all of the characters are getting ready to go out, and in the second act everyone is coming home.

This amorphous structure inspired director Simon Curtis' and designer Paul Brown to present the work in promenade style: the audience moves around the set following the action

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and sometimes the characters. "We felt it was right," says Curtis. "I don't think every play could be done this way, but when a play is right for this style, it is very liberating. It makes the production an event. *Road* is just a collection of scenes that are really a collection of people who just happen to live on the same road. The notion of the evening is that you as an audience member go along the road meeting the various people there."

Road marks the playwriting debut of Cartwright, who was born in Lancashire and still lives there. Discussing his background, Cartwright states, "I never really did any writing before this. I have no real literary background at all. I went to a very rough school, with no great expectations for myself. I just liked fooling about with words, you know what I mean? Never in a serious way, but every now and again I would write a poem for myself, or maybe for a girlfriend. It's always been there in my soul and found expression in this play."

Director Simon Curtis is currently the deputy director of the Royal Court Theater in London. Until recently, he ran the Royal Court's experimental space, the Theater Upstairs, where *Road* was first produced. He then assisted the Court's director, Max Strafford-Clark, on a number of productions and directed the English premiere of Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind* and Howard Brenton's latest play, *Greenland*, at the Court. Curtis describes the advent of *Road* at the Court as "a good example of the literary department of the Royal Court working very well."

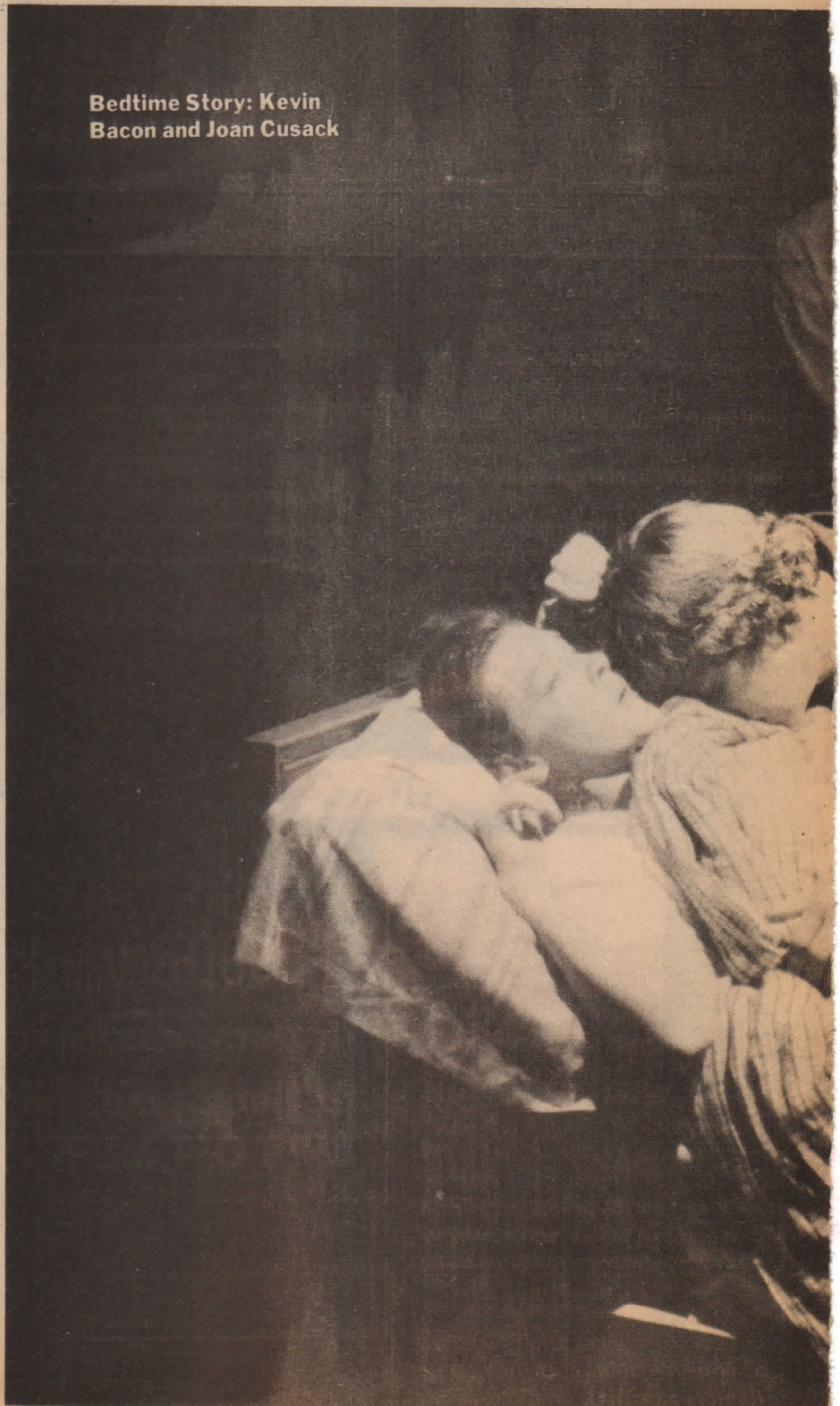
Cartwright explains how that process worked. "I wrote some little pieces and sent them to the Royal Court. And they really liked the work, which was a nice surprise. They gave me some money to complete the play, *Road* came out, we put it on, and it was successful. Since then, it has been performed all over the place—in Denmark, Portugal, all sorts of places. It gave me a living, because I had no money. I was unemployed, on the dole. It has been a great boon. It seems I'm a writer now."

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The signpost on the set of *Road* is defaced so that all the audience reads is the word "Road." "Every town and every neighborhood has its own road, hasn't it?" asks Cartwright. "There are quite

wealthy parts and quite wealthy people, but in general, the North of England is much poorer and much more neglected than the South of England. There is a great divide in the country and I suppose *Road* could

Bedtime Story: Kevin Bacon and Joan Cusack



be looked on as a kind of metaphor of how the North has been treated or how it has been left out and left in the dark, treated like a backstreet really, like a back alley. It isn't based on things I've gathered in my life. It's

really a road of my imagination. That's why it has no name—the Road with No Name.”

The political message of the play is unavoidable, given the devastating impact of Prime Minister Margaret

Thatcher's policies on the poorer communities in Britain and the North in particular. Curtis explains that a “spiritual imprisonment, particularly of young people,” prevails in England today.

Nevertheless, Cartwright says he didn't set out to write a political play. “I wanted to write about a certain type of people who live in poverty and have to cope with it. Some survive, some make a joy out of it, some find a way exploiting it. The by-product of it is, I suppose, political. The idea is that some people are getting a really raw deal when they shouldn't be. It also seems to me that people don't always get a fair say. There are people in their forties, fifties, and eighties who have got things to say and are not given a chance in plays. Anger in plays is usually about young people. There's quite a lot of anger to be expressed by angry old men.” Interestingly enough, it was at the Royal Court, that the prototypical Angry Young Man play, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, was first produced in 1956.

Road garnered raves from the British press, won awards for Best New Play, and caused pundits to make connections with the legendary Osborne play. Curtis doesn't take these literary connections too seriously. “It's the sort of thing an academic might write about rather than us. *Road* is, I suppose, in the tradition of the Royal Court—an angry play based in a working class community—and yet it is quite different. Jim Cartwright provides so much for all of us to use our imaginations in, and that happens all too rarely in the theater here. It was a voyage into the unknown.”

Another obvious literary parallel is with Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*. Cartwright finds it flattering that people “bring things like that up,” but Curtis dismisses the idea, saying that he has never read the Thomas play. “The structure of the play is not very original, but what is wonderful about the play is the specialness of the individual scenes, which comes entirely from Jim. You never have a scene like the one in *Road* where the two kids starve themselves in bed.”

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Cartwright admits that he wasn't after a documentary, slice-of-life, kind of play. "I wrote from my imagination, but that's not to say that people like this don't exist in much more extreme forms. There are some pubs in my town that you could go in and find people who are ten times larger than they are in the play. You see them in New York every five minutes."

The speeches Cartwright gives his characters are deliberately unrealistic. He explains: "Most people talk on the surface. I liked the idea of people talking a bit more from underneath and also playing around with words. I liked the idea of the ordinary people being given a voice."

For example, in one scene, a former pugilist, Skin-Lad, played by Michael Wincott, describes his conversion to pacifism:

I moved in to strike, my fist was like a golden orb in the wet night. I said it was night. I struck deep and dangerous and beautiful with a twist of the fist on the out. But he was only smiling, and he opened his eyes to me like two diamonds in the night. I said it was night, and said, over to you Buddha. So now I just read the dharma. And when men at work pass the pornography,

I pass it on and continue with the dharma. And when my mother makes eggs and bacon and chips for me I push it away towards the salt cellar and read of the dharma. And when the man on the bus pushes, I continue with the dharma. Ommmmmm.

"I always liked the idea of ordinary people doing extraordinary things," Cartwright remarks. "I also think a lot of people see things poetically—especially simpler people—but can't always express it. Usually in plays it's intellectuals who express ideas and swap ideas and thoughts. In *Road* ordinary people are given that chance to blast it out, to show that they know, show that they feel."

Royal Court productions usually find their way across the Atlantic via the Public Theater's exchange program, under the direction of Joseph Papp. *Road* was proposed as an exchange for the Public's *Cuba and his Teddy Bear*, but plans failed to materialize. Gregory Mosher, director of Lincoln Center, saw the production in its first incarnation at the Court's Theater Upstairs. "I think he loved the event of it," says Curtis. Mosher decided to mount the American production. "We were go-

ing to do it at the Mitzi Newhouse Theater at Lincoln Center," Curtis adds. "But the fire department had such severe regulations that it proved impossible to do there and Gregory wanted to do it promenade style, which I think is right. When we found the space at La Mama, I was thrilled, because I always thought that the show had a more downtown feel to it."

What problems did Curtis encounter in working with the American cast? "I have always been a fan of American actors. But I realize now that English actors had an instinct or insight into the roles which was extraordinarily helpful in rehearsals." He explains that American actors have much less experience in ensemble work and playing multiple characters than their British counterparts. Two of the actresses, Joan Cusak and Jayne Haynes, visited Lancashire before rehearsals commenced; actor Michael Wincott's father comes from Lancashire.

The cast worked with a dialogue coach and consulted with Cartright on matters of dialect. "I think accents are important, as the play is located in Lancashire. When I did *A Lie of the Mind* last year, we worked exactly the same way to get to Montana. I just don't want the accents to get in the

way. I think what we have achieved is that it is possible to forget accents even if they are not one hundred percent accurate. Once you are aware that you are listening to an accent then there is no performance. The quality is what is most important."

"We couldn't take anything for granted culturally," Curtis adds. Little changes have been made to the script to make it clearer for American audiences. Nevertheless, in spite of cultural differences, both Curtis and Cartwright have found that the dress rehearsal and preview audiences are proving to be very similar to the Royal Court audiences in London. "Just like the English audiences," Cartwright explains, "there is a good mix. We have the quite wealthy theater-goer type and also the street kind of people, and also the artistic trendy kind of people. A lot of young people are coming as well. I like to have that good mix. When they all mix together on the Road it is very nice. I think it is going to be pretty much the same trip."

Curtis indicates that when the show started its official previews on the 14th of this month, the Lincoln Center subscriber base, which has a fairly high percentage of older people, initially showed some reluctance to adapt to the promenade situation. "People didn't quite know what the rules of the promenade were. We are putting in a few more lines just to educate the audience in the first half, so that in the second half everyone knows what the rules are. But I want it not to be precious. I want it to be almost like an adventure playground. The unpredictability of the evening is quite important. So much theater is so po-faced and polite and I want the evening to be rougher." The company is currently experimenting with the size of the ideal audience for this production. "With promenade there is a number beyond which you can't go," the director states. "You can't find that till you're there. You can never quite predict that. At the moment, I think the usual off-Broadway audience of 399 is what we are aiming for each night."

Curtis is anxious to reassure people that there will be no audience par-



Rivinite Lacombe

The Road Crew: Back row, Simon Curtis, Kevin Bacon, Jayne Haynes, and Michael Wincott. Front row, Jack Wallace, Joan Cusack, Betsy Aidem, and Gerry Bamman.

ticipation in the sense that "they won't be asked to take their clothes off or sing a song." He would like to see people come in their jeans and enjoy themselves. "It's important that they go on the journey with the actors. As in real life, some characters you like more than others. The great thing about the play is that everyone has a different notion of their favorite scene. I like that very much because that is like real life."

As far as the author of *Road* is concerned, Cartwright would like the audience "to take away whatever they've gathered. Some people may take a political standpoint and say that was

a great approach. Somebody may take the road and find that they had a bloody good night out. Because even though it is about a very deprived area there are also quite a lot of laughs in it. It's also a bit of a celebration of life, people who haven't got much but are making the most of it.

"It might be the first time that somebody has sat on the floor and they go away thinking about that. I hope there are a lot of things to take from there. I hope *Road* has got not just one level, but quite a few levels. Audiences can take a slice of whatever level they want, take it home with them, and eat it later." □