



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Year 2011

Article 5

1-1-2011

Nancy Tippersworth

Charles R. Zange

Gettysburg College, zangch01@cnav.gettysburg.edu

Class of 2011

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Zange, Charles R. (2011) "Nancy Tippersworth," *The Mercury*: Year 2011, Article 5.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2011/iss1/5>

This open access fiction is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Nancy Tippersworth

Keywords

creative writing, fiction

Author Bio

Charles Zange is a History and French double major from northern Illinois. He works part time in the Theatre Department on campus and is pursuing his education to become a professor of History.

NANCY TIPPERSWORTH

CHARLES ZANGE

Let me just say that it was not my idea to invite Nancy Tippersworth back to our theatre. She was Angie's friend, not mine. You know Angie, right? She's our Production Manager. She's the one who invites people to come to perform here. I'm just the Tech Director, so I'm not the one to blame. I heard what a mess Nancy left from her last performance two years ago at this theatre. I mean, I wasn't there myself because I was working my other job. It was that weird transition time for me between getting into the Tech Director spot here in West Virginia and getting out of my old job in carpentry at Bungugoogaloo in Indiana (not kidding, that's the real name of a theatre. Don't ask me about that, I have no idea where it came from). It was a pain, too, to move all my crap from one cramped office eight hours away to this cramped office in Glaidensburg, West Virginia. It didn't help that this guy Rob who worked there wouldn't leave me alone. He just sat there watching me move in and talking about some show he worked on twenty years ago when it was the hottest summer on record or something like that. I don't remember. I wasn't really listening to him.

Anyway, I didn't know Nancy personally before this but I'd heard all the stories. Angie told me that Nancy was really into environmental yoga, like stretching next to waterfalls and volcanoes and stuff. That seemed weird at the time but made a lot of sense after I met her. From my crew, I heard how Nancy was demanding, how she was stuck up, how she insulted the help, and how they were still cleaning up the paper snow from that winter scene she threw in to her show last June. Yeah, last *June*. You know, that month when it doesn't snow? Leave it to Nancy, my crew told me, she'll find a way to bring snow into a summer show. So needless to say, I was expecting the worst before she had even stepped in through the door. Her second visit was scheduled for a November weekend. I remember thinking, *Why not a beach scene this time?* Believe it or not, I've seen a beach on stage before. I don't remember which show it was, but it was in the Cadillac in Chicago about a year ago. They pulled it off pretty nicely, too.

That's the real problem that I was facing with Nancy Tippersworth: *expectation*. Nobody but a director would ever walk into a building, point to a corner of the room, and say "Put a beach there." Nancy had high expectations but little knowledge of reasonable limitations of what was physically possible in a limited period of time. She was a director with just

the wrong amount of experience. She was nowhere near top dog at the Gershwin in New York, but she was someone who has gone to that theatre enough times to have Broadway expectations for wherever she went. She'd seen a beach on stage before, so she *expected* that it could be replicated anywhere. There's nothing more dangerous than a director with a little bit of knowledge and without any understanding of practical engineering. They walk into a theatre, and I swear it's like a redneck with a case of beer trying to build himself a unicycle. It's chaos. It's sheer, unstoppable chaos. And I was defenseless to do anything about it.

So she got here last November at about five o'clock on a frigid Friday morning. I was standing in the loading bay with my crew, all of us in our blue work shirts, on time as usual. Rob was standing closest to the door but he was trying to look the most casual, you know? I think he was saying something about how it wasn't as cold that day as it was some other time he was there twenty years ago. I'm pretty sure he was only standing there so that Nancy Tippersworth would see him first and think that he was the Technical Director instead of me.

At 5:01 a.m., the Door of Destiny, as we like to call it, opened. A couple of crew members from Nancy's group filed in. We murmured hellos to them. Those guys were tired. They'd been driving all night to get here. Their crew manager walked in and mistook Rob for being the TD, just like I thought would happen. I finally got to their crew manager, and he introduced himself as Bill. He was a nice guy, you know, a straight talker. I could tell that he was very organized because of the way he carried himself. I told him where to find the hot coffee and doughnuts. He nodded, but he didn't head that way because the Door of Destiny creaked loudly again. I heard it opening, and I knew who must have been coming in. I turned around and saw a tall woman with neat brown hair under a bright red cap. She was in her thirties and dressed like it with a red blouse, black slacks, and red shoes. I don't know if I've ever told you before, but the Door of Destiny sticks a little in cold weather. Rob likes to open it, so he can talk with people coming in first. I hate that guy. He tried to say something to Nancy, but she handed him her black coat and walked right past him straight to me without saying a word. I couldn't help but smile when I saw Rob demoted to "coat guy," his plan to pretend to be TD utterly foiled. My day, it seemed, was destined only to get worse.

"Ms. Tippersworth," I said cordially to her, "it is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Tom Stiff." I extended my hand. She had a limp hand shake. There was a lot of moisturizer lotion on her fingers; she obviously had no intention of working with her hands.

We unloaded the truck onto the stage. It's a pretty easy leg from the overhead door to the big double-doors through the back wall of the stage. The truck and its equipment were very well organized. I'm sure Bill set it all up. Move in was a breeze. I showed Nancy around the building, pointing out all the dressing rooms and most of the important stuff. She didn't say much during the tour, but I was sure she would find her voice when the show started going. And she did. Our second set-up task was finishing the lighting. Five minutes into light focusing we had to stop. Nancy wasn't happy with the style of lighting that we had implemented for her show.

Now here's the thing about the lighting for that show: Nancy had *faxed us her lighting diagram*. That meant that she had known beforehand what lights we were going to put up for her show. We followed her diagram perfectly. I had put in all the side lighting myself. But that was the week before, and you know directors; they never look back, lest they befuddle the pricelessly organic lives of their performances by using things like previous experience.

So imagine me standing with Rob in the light booth above the audience and Nancy on stage yelling up to us. She was staring at the set with her arms crossed and a cigarette in her hands (yeah, she's smoking even though it isn't allowed because Angie told me that "it's just easier if you let it happen"), prattling indirectly about her own inadequate powers in lighting design.

I shouted to her from the light booth, "What don't you like about the lights, Ms. Tippersworth?"

"They aren't showy enough," she replied.

I had no idea what that meant. "What do you want to change?"

"I think we need more red."

Classic. That's a *classic* director move. She wanted to use a new color to spice up a dead plot that really just needs some backlighting to make her actors stick out. The problem wasn't that the lights weren't "showy" enough, it was that most of them lit the stage from the front, so her actors' faces seemed flat and dead to the audience. Rob and I looked at each other and we both understood that much. He just started chuckling to himself. I shook my head. I had half a mind to not even try and help Nancy just to watch her fail miserably, but it didn't feel right, you know? I don't believe in euthanizing stray dogs, either, and somehow butchering the lights to an even more disturbingly asynchronous waste of electricity felt cruel. I tried to solve a few problems simultaneously. "Well, why don't I throw in some more stuff from the back?" I yelled down to her. "You know, backlighting. It will add depth, and I can put it in red. I think it—"

She shook her hand. You have to stop talking when the directors shake their hands. "Not a chance," replied Nancy. "The audience doesn't sit behind the actors. You don't need light back there."

I don't even know where to begin with this one. Try it at home is all I can say to you. Try putting two flashlights straight at a person's face, and then try it with one straight on and another above and slightly behind the person's head. See which one gives the face more depth.

"Let me see what I can come up with," I said to Nancy. I looked at Rob again with a face of disbelief. He smiled, shook his head, and very slowly turned on some reds from the front. Nancy kept asking him to put more and more red into the look. Pretty soon the dimmers were running at 100% on those lights. Red mixed in with the blues we already had on and turned the whole stage purple. The actors looked like a demonic softball team. Every stage fabric that was even coincidentally ruffled (window curtains, bedspreads, dresses, napkins) transformed into a candy cane.

"Yes, I like this," says Nancy.

"Of course you do," I murmured to myself and to Rob. Even if directors don't like the change, they don't like to say that they don't like it, so they say that they like it. That's how they do their thing. At this point I started to seriously question whether Nancy was actually that needy of a director or if she was just as bad as all the others.

Rob sat down in his chair and leaned back. "What overarching artistic concept are we going for again?" Rob asked me. "*Dante meets Candy Land?*"

I laughed. "We're going for *Get it done so Nancy will go away*," I replied as I headed downstairs.

The worst had only begun. Because the lights had changed, Nancy needed to change the costumes. "Too flashy," said Nancy. Apparently the show wasn't showy enough without red, but the costumes were too flashy with it. I don't even know how "flashy" and "showy" are different, but at least changing the costumes would tone down the candy canes on stage. After that, Nancy took to replacing the bedspreads. "Too muted," said Nancy. I've never been comfortable with people using 'muted' to describe anything but sound. We had to send someone to Target to buy new stuff for the beds. Then, Nancy went after the paint detail on the stairs of the set. Don't even get me started there. Before I knew it we were four hours from the 7:00 p.m. opening, and Nancy was considering new wallpaper in the bedroom scene.

It was intolerable. There was no way we were going to get that show going in time. Everyone was dead tired. The doughnuts were long gone. I was so hungry that even Rob's joke about the jar of peanut butter and the

teapot sounded pretty funny when he told it for the umpteenth time. Before finalizing her decision on the wallpaper, Nancy told us that she wanted to take a walk to clear her head. She left through the back door, and we all sighed in relief. Both crews squeezed in the break room and devoured the cold sandwiches I had bought for us the night before. I got the chance to talk to Bill for a little while. It turned out that Nancy was always like she was that day. She would make major changes to the show everywhere they went.

"You get used to it," said Bill to me.

"No you don't," I said back with a smile.

He laughed and poured himself his fifth cup of coffee of the day. "With enough coffee you can get used to anything," said Bill. Bill was a real nice guy. I'm still in touch with him from time to time. He's since found new work in a town near Houston. I don't remember exactly where. Texas isn't my favorite place on earth, but he seems to like it, so it's fine.

Anyway, we were just sitting around in the break room when we heard a sort of a crumbling sound coming from outside. Bill and I rushed out to check on what it was. He thought it might have been part of the building cracking in the wind in spite of the fact that it was a pretty clear day. I knew better. Out behind the theatre there is sort of a high kind of rocky cliff. It's a pretty area, but we keep it quartered off with a guardrail, a seven foot fence, and "Danger" signs every ten feet to deter any trespassers.

Bill looked at me. "You don't think..."

Remembering what Angie said about her, I started walking to the fence ready to bet anything that Nancy "Environmental Yoga" Tippersworth had jumped it to stand on the cliff wall. Sure enough, I found an area where the rocks had fallen away. There was a pack of cigarettes and a red hat on the edge of the cliff which I retrieved by reaching under the metal wires. I handed those things to Bill who knew them to be Nancy's. I didn't want to look over the edge to see where she ended up. It's at least a hundred-foot drop to the ground from that cliff. But, I felt sort of obligated to know where she was, being that she was Angie's friend, so I climbed the fence a little just to see over. Nancy was all the way at the bottom. Not to gross you out, but it was pretty clear from what I saw that she didn't make it. I discovered that day that the heavily marked cliff fence is pretty effective against normal, risk-averse people, but it doesn't guard well against the intellectualism of the self-entitled.

I told Bill about a security camera that I had back there that might have seen what happened. We went back inside to the office to see if the camera had picked anything up (we don't have a daytime security guy; they're too expensive). When we watched the video—the same one, incidentally, that

formally absolved us of any responsibility for her death in court—we saw Nancy Tippersworth leaving the rear door and crossing the cold back lot. She was eyeing up the fence and, with little hesitation, ignored the warning signs and climbed over it. And sure enough, once her feet were down on the cliff's edge, she started stretching. Seriously. She was doing her yoga crap on the cliff of a hundred-foot rock wall. Apparently she wanted to get closer to nature or something. That wouldn't surprise me. Directors love doing that. They love to get really close to something so they can “truly” feel it and experience it. Well, not to be too crass, but she certainly got more than her fair share of “feeling” and “experiencing” that particular cliff. She tried to light a cigarette, the rocks gave out, and she lost her footing and fell to an untimely death.

It was a curious sort of moment for everyone. We hadn't been around death all that much in our lives, although actors acted it out all the time on the stage. After that, Bill and I talked for a few minutes. We needed to decide first and foremost what was going to happen with the show. In less than four hours, 3,000 people were coming and we hadn't fully set up yet. We decided that we would wait to call the police about Nancy until after the performance was over. We couldn't cancel it, after all: 3,000 people paying an average of \$50 a ticket was too much to just throw away when everyone in the crews depended on that money for their salaries. To economize on time, Bill and I simply cancelled all the changes Nancy wanted to make to the show. We put the actors back in their original costumes and did a full dress rehearsal in less than three hours, leaving ample preshow time to rest up. I even had time to throw in backlighting so that the actors really stood out on stage. The performance was spectacular. It was one of the best renditions of *Streetcar Named Desire* that I had ever seen, and that's saying something because I've never been a huge fan of that show. It's the kind of show that you either love or you hate, you know? It's in the same league as *Doll House* or *Killer Joe* as far as I'm concerned. I'll admit it, though, that performance had me converted. In fact, the performance was so good that Bill and I forgot to call in to the police about Nancy Tippersworth being missing until the next morning, and that was after we had already moved the entire show out of the building and back onto the truck. I'm serious, we were in the parking lot waving goodbye, and then he said, “Hey, did you ever call the police about Nancy?” and I said “Oh man, I totally forgot!” and he said “Me too!” So he got out of the truck and we called it in. The police came and found her. Bill and I told the police that she just went missing, and we didn't know where she had gone. All our crews backed us up, too. We weren't totally lying, after all.