

The Palace of Fine Arts

1966

At ten o'clock they called us all down from the scaffolds where we were finishing the tops of the columns of the Pantheon. All was ready for the next stage...the arches and the first valance of the great dome. To duplicate the frieze and sculpture of the original, the contractor had decided to build very large frameworks as segments of the arch with plaster carefully built into it as a mold for the concrete. For months, there has been a crew of plasterers & carpenters building these huge forms.

They called everyone together in the covered building to help get the forms out into the yard where the crane could attach & lift them. No combination of forklifts or dollies was thought possible to make a safe carry...so they assembled about fifty of us and explained that we would range ourselves all along the edge evenly spaced...then try to lift all in unison on command. Then we had to walk about thirty yards before we could turn ninety degrees and take it out the wide doorway... It seemed reasonable that we could do it. We just had to pay attention to the foreman for when to lift, and as they admonished us, attempt to keep an even strain the whole time. If one of us had to let go it could get dangerous; a ripple effect, like the chord of force when a hundred people synchronize their steps on a bridge... but the polar opposite.

Picture us now - men in overalls, grimy, hardhatted in that old style like World War One helmets. Some putting on gloves, everyone testing the grip edge, preparing a little as if it's a track&field event. We have to be strong and disciplined. It's not really going to be 'easy'. This form weighs many tons.

It's big in an awkward trapezoidal shape. There are cavities where the plaster defines some elfin figure, and much cross-bracing and fretwork where the carpentry is improvised to support the odd plaster shapes. It's really magnificent...we're congratulating the "inside" crew. Up till now we have kinda lorded it over them. Nothing nasty, just the usual teasing... the way the scaffold crew might amongst themselves say something about 'those Inside men taking coffee breaks'. *They think they're more skilled. They stare at blueprints, sketch out a way of building the unorthodox attachment to the column-tops. Meanwhile we're up in the canopy risking our lives. Our particular cleverness will never be seen...it's something like: a perfect way to brace the interior forms to each other within the void in the pilaster walls. But the real work is up Here ...that's what we feel. We're actually building this thing. We're the orangutans, the gibbons of space up here. It's not so easy to do this with overalls weighted down with nails and tools... We land those scaffold sections up at the sixty-foot level with everything swaying and our eyes up at the crane.... and we figure: we're on the Front Lines.*

Meanwhile those guys in the "Palace", the Inside men, are just figuring stuff out and cutting odd shapes on the big shop-saws...and bullshitting endlessly with all those Italian plastering guys. One

day there were even photographers in there from the Chronicle. Come up Here someday with those cameras!

But now that we were standing around it, the Form was damned impressive.

Suddenly we were the guys who didn't really know what to do. We were in *their* territory. Some of us felt like...'we're the strong ones after all. You had to come get us to help you lift it.' But even that had us a little worried.

Now Howard, the Foreman, took his grand conductor's baton and got our attention. *On my sayso, you'll all lift at once. But don't jerk it up like a weightlifter. I want you to lift slowly. If we get it up to our waists, then let's set it back down slowly. This is just to get the feel of it.* Then he said LIFT, and it felt as if you couldn't budge it. I thought I would just lift as if I were struggling against a hundred pounds. But that's not it. This thing weighs many tons...if I surge against it I'm fighting all those tons alone.

A few seconds later we felt it slowly rising. A strange impossible thing. It seemed to take all one's strength, EVERYone's, to break the inertia. But once it was rising, each person's effort became easier. Howard asked us how we were doing? Everyone said *fine*. Said it was not that hard. Said *let's go!* And he looked and thought and then said, *Allright! let's not set it back down, we'll just take it now. SoI want you to begin walking, but slowly, and we'll have to try to walk very much alike...take small steps.*

And then, another sensation of the Many Tons. At first we couldn't move! I tried to step but the Form was staying put. I had to step back again, then strain against it as if shoving a cow into her stall. But in a few seconds, there was a shift, very gradually increasing in momentum...and we each managed to take that first step, as if in slow motion. Now the Form seemed to want to move. It accelerated a little, and one felt as if one had no choice now about the speed. Just take the next step in a good slow pace. Now we were almost walking.

Howard yelled out to *keep an even strain and to watch the direction.* Guys in front were actually pulling and on the sides they were walking in an angled fashion...and it seemed all at once like the most exhilarating thing that ever happened to you! Like being gods, or dreamers in unison! There was a nervy camaraderie mounting rapidly, almost an electrical impulse traveling around the rim in our handholds and strain. A flash of thought that this is something to always remember. Never happened before...maybe back in medieval times? Wow. To feel how much strength we had in union! We who were the active union people were all thinking about that, it was impossible not to. Our union makes us strong. Talk about solidarity! Then there were thoughts of the old Shakers, the old barn-raising parties. How they must have had this feeling often.

I think everyone was drifting for a good thirty seconds and our momentum increased until it was that of a serious hiker. And then Howard yelled out that we ought to start thinking about the turn coming up...He warned us that as the Form turned, some of us would be forced into a faster pace as others opposite would be slowing almost to a stop. That was a great insight; we all

tried to gauge what that would mean for our own effort...but he hadn't come up with a way to command us, and we started having that same problem of inertia...we could not make the thing slow down at first. It was going too far in the original track, we could all begin to see that the radius of the turn because of the great size of the form was already being exceeded. Similarly, we were not getting the turn going. I recall straining with all my heart against the direction but it was having no effect at all. Then there were some frightened yells as the men on the edge closer to the far side of the doorway began to think they might be crushed against that wall. We were exhorted to make the turn, Howard running now along the left side urging us to push harder, but the gains were too slow in coming. Some guys on the far side had fallen while trying to back up as the speed changed, and then there was a panic as that edge began to dip down. Two men each lifting at two-hundred pounds-effort suddenly vanished and the man next to them was stumbling...Howard yelled for some of us to slide that way & some guys were already doing it, but then we were in danger of letting some other area slump and there were quick yells from all of us to stop moving out of position.

Then the turn began its own momentum and gathered speed. The edge farthest from the pivoting zone was really picking up speed. The pivoters were almost standing still and the outer edge was moving suddenly as fast as a man could run...and run they did, one guy dropping away as the form edge grazed the door walls and all of us having a rush of dread so intense that one would have thought we were on the Titanic as the iceberg began to scrape alongside. A fear that a couple of us might get mangled here now...what if several men fall, it'll go down, we'll be caught under it...but we can't let go, can't leave the other guys...if I let go right now, the loss of lift might be the camel's straw, it might lurch and suddenly crash down at great speed as we all panicked to let go. If that were viewed later in slow motion, could you tell then who were really the heroes? the last ones to let go would die... I already felt the test coming over me. I was panicky, I had a powerful desire to let go and jump clear...and I was nearing the end of my stamina at this intensity of strain. It felt like my muscles would pop or rip and they were screaming at me to do something. There were guys yelling out to hold ON!. And we did in fact hold on...the turn finally slowed itself and Howard ordered us to come to a full stop... which we did. That gave us time to get a better grip, and for the guys who had fallen away to come back. More help was called out of the Shack, and we panted and were speechless for a minute. Then Howard called out to us to begin again in the same way, but this time to never let the speed gain like that. *Go real slow!* And we did. This time we knew we had to stay in complete control and we did. Another twenty yards and we came to a slow stop while some men arranged the 4x6 stickers under the form....& we paused and felt again the exhilaration of our Deed. Then slowly lowered it to the ground. Phheewwww!