

HOWARD O. SACKLER 1929-1982

by Helen Roach

Howard Sackler, born in New York in 1929, attended Brooklyn College where he received the free college education available to those with an 87.5 admission average. As an English major of exceptional scholarly bent and poetic talent, he was introduced to W. H. Auden.

Choosing the elective course in "The Oral Study of Literature" in the Department of Speech and Theatre, he became my student. He was the boy who sat in the end seat of the front row who jumped for the door with the bell. But he never received a critique sheet without returning with the correction and a better reading. In some 40 years of teaching, this was the only student for whom I cried inside if he missed a class, "What did I do wrong?"

The semester after that class, I was directing Antigone and wanted the boy in the front row for the small but important role of the soldier telling Creon how Antigone, contrary to royal decree, "like a mother bird," picked up her brother's bones for burial. The letter to Howard was not answered and a replacement had to be found. A few days before the production, he appeared explaining that a crisis had forced him to move, delaying receipt of the letter. "Anyhow, I'm glad someone loves me." In later meetings, I learned how, for most of his teen years, he had been making it alone. Attending commencement in a borrowed cap and gown, he said, "I came to thank all those who helped me."

It was over a year after graduation that Auden named him one of two promising American poets to read on the program of Major Poets' readings at the Museum of Modern Art. On this occasion another poet, Marianne Moore, introduced her choice of two promising American poets.

Howard came back to college for help in the reading of his poetry. At first, like many poets, he was so involved in what he had written that he was missing a sense of terminus, of reaching the listener. We worked together for a few sessions, and he was ready. At the museum reading, he was the only one who came across. And that night at the Rockefeller reception two young women, founders of Caedmon Records, offered him the job of director of their recently launched program of recordings of the spoken word. It was a new emphasis in the recording field then dominated by music. In meetings afterwards he would sometimes say, "I wish I could do something for you!"

In 1954 Caedmon published Want My Shepherd, a first collection of Howard Sackler's poems. Many of these had already been published in such magazines as Commentary, The Hudson Review, New Directions, 13, and Poetry: A Magazine of Verse.

The Caedmon vision encompassed the recording of English literature from its wellsprings to the present: prose, poetry, and plays in addi-

tion to readings and speeches by living authors. Sackler's assignment was to lift the words from their preservative entrapment on the printed page and transfer them to the spoken music of human speech. For him it became a world of ever-growing discovery, of emerging possibilities, and of a joy. Those at Caedmon remember his excitement on being able to record Richard Lattimore's translation of parts of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey read by Anthony Quale. Would that it had been his lot to record Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet, reading his poetry.

It was in 1960-61, while a visiting research fellow at Radcliffe, looking for spoken recordings for the Brooklyn College Listening Room, that I attended a Poets' Theatre production there of one of Sackler's plays. Entering the theatre at the back, I heard him saying to a lady in a lovely green dress (the future Lynn Sackler) "I thought you would be here." Then excusing himself he came over to say hello.

It was during that stay in Cambridge that he urged me to write a critical study of spoken records "with your ear training and experience. I'll get the girls to send you review copies." This had already been suggested by Harvard Professor William Alfred, the poet and another Brooklyn College graduate. Later the Radcliffe Librarian recommended sending part of what was written to Scarecrow Press, which eventually published Spoken Records. "Librarians have been waiting for fifteen years for someone with your listening experience to do a critical study of spoken records."

Perhaps the most demanding challenge came to Sackler with the Caedmon undertaking of the recording of all of Shakespeare in preparation for the Shakespeare Quatrecentenary in 1964, a recording stint shared in part with Peter Wood.

"To repeat, as best I can, what I told you--when I was asked to record the Shakespeare Canon (about 1960) there was no question--for me--of doing the plays anywhere but in England. The vast pool of actors who had grown up in a Shakespeare-centered theatre world, had heard verse spoken on the stage most of their lives, and had learned and molded their talents to the demands of those plays, providing me with resources which barely existed in America" (from a letter to the author, April 20, 1982).

Mel Gussow, the New York Times play reviewer, once wrote, "When Shakespeare is performed well his Elizabethan blank verse sounds natural and contemporary. When done poorly it sounds archaic." Howard Sackler's skill in the recording medium, his poet's understanding of metrical feet in verse, of the prose rhythm of his own language and the poet within him make for the "performed well" Shakespeare recordings which are ours today.

During the recording years in London, he once wrote, "My children continue to astonish me and I'm constantly embarrassed by being so at home with one and two year olds ... Sir Ralph Richardson has been like a father to me."

Speaking of modern happenings in the world of recording he once wrote: "The development of stereophonic recording has made it possible to present to the listener a play--as opposed to the reading of a play. ... We find that although one microphone playing through one speaker could not hold the mirror up to nature, five microphones playing through two speakers can. The actors can move about as they deliver, handle props, sing, dance, duel, kneel, climb onto platforms--in short, act--and be felt, literally (or nearly so) to be doing it before one's very eyes. The actor, aware of this, tends to give a much truer performance than when standing rooted to the spot and feeling a bit invisible ... "Here are the players" cries a voice in your living room, and they are here, not fifteen rows and an orchestra pit away. One hears them right next to each other, speaking, as in life. A delicate vocabulary of sighs, breathings, smackings, sniffs, coughs, and ehms emerges with the words, footsteps, clinks, and clatters, knocks. The rhubarb-rhubarb dodge will just not do; the ear, learning of crowds gone mad in the streets of Rome, listens for them, must have them by the thousands. If there is a big party at the Capulets, it has to sound like one, the lovers must murmur to each other in close-up. A man talking to himself must give the impression of being inaudible from five feet away. Deaths by violence must often be unbearable. One must be absolutely modern. You close your eyes, and you are there" (from copy provided by Mrs. Lynn Sackler).

Paul Kresh once noted the army of stars Sackler directed on records.

Sometimes he has waited years for the right actor to be available for the right role, and he thinks nothing of rehearsing for a recording for days or even weeks before turning on a single microphone.

I once called Sackler "the Toscanini of the spoken word," and there is more than one reason for the comparison. He favors, for example, a brisk pace and a dry sound for the drama on records, just as the Maestro did for music. He is finicky to a fault about results. He often supplies his own music and personally creates the sound effects. ("Stereo Talks to Howard Sackler," Stereo Review, Sept., 1969).

A yearning to create poetry and to write and produce his own verse-drama especially after years of recording Shakespeare led to Howard Sackler's departure from his rewarding fifteen years with Caedmon.

The new life was supported by his talent for story-telling then in demand in Hollywood and London for screen plays. This included such writing as parts of Jaws I and Jaws II.

Home for him was Los Angeles, London, or the island of Ibiza. The move to writing demanded hard work in both the creative effort and producing his plays. There were also the harsh attacks from critics that sometimes followed.

It was to the home on Ibiza that he came to rest, convalesce, be with family, write, and relax, exploring the marine world through deep-sea diving more than 200 feet down.

From Ibiza came this letter: "I'm hard at work on the new play again; eight scenes done, fourteen to go, cast of 35, I'm afraid. What can one do when a gleam appears but follow. That's what I keep telling myself anyway."

Much later a letter from Brown's Hotel in London tells more: "Your welcome note just caught up with me. I've been (mainly) in Spain all summer working hard on a new play, a sort of epic farce, called Klondike--have to pause a bit to earn some money with a film which brings me here. I'll try to get Fidel on here, or perhaps Paris--a great disappointment of course [It had closed after the first night in New York] and I haven't really figured it out yet: Thank you for your kind words about it. I'll be in New York or passing through in a few weeks and will call you."

The Great White Hope with its Broadway production had received the Pulitzer in 1969. Then followed Good Bye Fidel (perhaps the bravest) and Semelweiss en route from the provinces. Klondike, almost finished before his untimely death of pulmonary thrombosis at the age of 52 in October, 1982 on the island of Ibiza, was awaiting completion for a promised production at the Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival in Cleveland. The envoi of a last letter came with "good luck, Godspeed, and love as always."

There now remains the task of assembling all of Sackler's plays, as well as an arsenal of unpublished poems for the placing of Auden's "most promising young American poet" in the history of English literature, which his years in sound recording had served so well.