Michael Bettencourt

Collected Essays: Volume 8
Scene4 - 2008-2013

Block & Tackle Productions Press

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Block & Tackle Productions Press

Co-Founders Elfin Frederick Vogel and Michael Bettencourt

www.blockandtackleproductions.com

To María Beatriz - always in all ways

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Introduction

The following essays come from my long-time association with the online arts journal Scene4 (scene4.com).

I have contributing for well over two decades, thanks to the superb editorship and friendship of Arthur Danin Adler. Here's a little bit of history about the endeavor from Mr. Adler himself.

Michael Bettencourt, 2025

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Avanti Scene4

In the late 1990's when the spread of the internet was just beginning, we had a bulletin-board/list/usergroup called Actors Workshop. It was a lively discussion of all things theatre that attracted some fine writers with wit and gusto. Then it began to attract writers and other artists who wanted to talk about other arts, and media, and culture in general. And it grew and the writing became terrific.

So I and a couple of other writers decided to try to morph this into a publication, which we called: Views/reViews, a kind of informal newsletter that began to evolve into a more prescient magazine-type. It grew, and in 2000, I decided to launch it as a print magazine. It's title: Scene4scene.

We couldn't do it...because print magazines had become exhorbitantly expensive. So I decided to take it to the web until we could, not as an "ezine," but adamantly as "A Print Magazine On the Web," which means that the reading experience was everything, the writing, the layout and feel of every page.

It was conceived as white type on a black page (which also enhances graphics), no advertising to interrupt that experience, no links in the text to lure the reader off the page. Without florid advertising on the page, we relied on a few patrons who helped finance the magazine. Within a short time we dropped the word "scene" from the logo and renamed it just Scene4 Magazine. The concept has remained intact to this day.

For me, the magazine is a work of art that has given me 25 years of joy and fulfillment.

It abides.

2013

Everything Old Is New Again

(January 2013)

By the time this "goes to print," *Zero Dark Thirty* will have hit the screens (opening on December 19), and one theme that I am sure will dominate the echo chamber (as it did in the run-up to the opening -- see Tom Carson in *The America Prospect* and Glenn Greenwald in the *Guardian)* has to do with whether the movie-makers are apologists for torture and the regime(s) that condoned it.

I have a different take on this, which is why I re-offer these two pieces. Kathryn Bigelow and her crew owe no debt of truth to anyone because they happen to be grounding their narrative in something historical. She and crew are not journalists or historians but narrative story-tellers and not are bound to tell any sort of "truth" at all. In fact, they do a disservice to themselves and their craft if they restrict themselves to verifiable truths, to the "based on a true story" tag-line. And in any case, the story of bin Laden is a made-up story anyway, much like a myth or fable, with a character named "bin Laden" and a character named "Obama" and so on. She can torque that fable anyway she wants and does not have to answer to anyone about it.

Of course, a movie without the torture would probably not sell as well (we crave the things that make us cringe), and in that sense, she is something of an apologist for it, if only because she accepts the dominant ideological framework for The Tale of Bin Laden and Obama -- not a criticism, just an observation. Spielberg's *Lincoln* does the same thing (though in his usual fashion, he does it through his creepy animatronics -- isn't Day-Lewis' Lincoln just another version of Haley Joel Osment's David in *A.I.*?), that is, makes the dominant ideology palatable and parsable to the helots who pay the taxes (and blood and bone) for it. Thus, "Necro-Political Theatre," a call to pry the dead hand of our ruling class and their death-based obsessions from our throats.

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The Thrall of the Authentic

(Originally Published July 2006)

I recently saw *columbinus* at the New York Theatre Workshop, a "Living Newspaper"-style examination of the shootings at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999. One of the first things the actors do as they come onstage is to remind the audience (actually, re-remind, since the program had already made

this point) that what they are about to see is based on transcripts, interviews, etcetera, etcetera. In other words, it's based on a true story.

And I think: So what?

I think this partly out of a reflex of resistance to being told how I should respond to what I am going to be shown. Because the phrase "based on a true story" is a protocol about how I should respond -- otherwise, why foreground it? And an essential element of a response-protocol based on the "authentic" (assuming we know what that word means) is "You cannot disbelieve." That is, you don't have a choice about how you respond to the story because it is true, it happened, and your imagination will not be allowed to gainsay or re-draft its reality by saying "but what if....."

But not only does "based on a true story" strait-jacket the imagination, it also lays down a claim that what is true is also, by virtue of its trueness, inherently dramatic. There is, however, no correlation between a true story and dramatic truth. The true story of Columbine – that is, the story laid down according to its facts -- is surely filled with enterprises of great pitch and moment. And *columbinus* lays them out by using a structure and approach that employs all sorts of what the reviews call "theatrical devices": streaming video from a hand-held camera, a subtitled audio tape of the 911 call from the school library, choreographed movements based on a popular songs, and so on.

However, these "devices" are just story-telling aids, variations on the textbook and the talking head. Their use does not automatically create a dramatic narrative. And even if they could create real drama, they aren't allowed to because everything happening on the stage is in service to "the true story," which means that the stage-action is pre-determined in its narration and destination, and such predetermination poisons dramatic truth.

A name exists for what columbinus does: documentary theatre. One book, *Documentary Theatre in the United States: An Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft* by Gary Fisher Dawson, defines documentary theatre as a "dramatic representation of societal forces using a close reexamination of events, individuals, or situations" and that in America documentary theatre has often been used as "an alternative to conventional journalism." And that's the rub for me, this confusion of mediums: if one wants to do journalism, then do journalism. If one wants to do documentaries, make a documentary film. Theatre is not the medium for the documentary/journalistic impulse.

And why not? The answer to this question takes into account my own evolution as a playwright. I first began writing plays from a documentary impulse. I agreed with Emma Goldman that modern drama was a powerful vehicle for bringing radical social and political ideas to audiences -- in short, that the playwright acted as an instructor. Which implied that there are people who need instruction, i.e., the audience. Which also implied an arrogant assumption on the playwright's part about the audience, i.e., that they were under-informed.

I no longer think like this, or at least not a lot like this. Because I've come to see that theatre's province, theatre's theatre, so to speak, is actually quite small and specific: it is to examine the state of the human heart under the pressure of knowing that death lurks just around the corner. And this examination uses an equally small and specific set of tools, actually only one tool: protagonists must fall apart in order to find out what glues their parts together, and the audience must experience this change as a visceral change (i.e., a shift in the viscera) without being lessoned by the playwright as to the change's meaning, purpose, direction, or usefulness.

This doesn't mean that the playwright mimics reality (assuming that we can even define "mimic" and "reality") but shapes it through conflict, reversal, restoration, reoccurrence -- in short, by using all the usual "devices," the playwright creates a staged reality, resembling "real" reality but not its cognate.

Documentary theatre pretends to "stage" its story, but it doesn't, really. The staging is a masque for a lesson, and it's the lesson – and its attached assumption that knowledge somehow makes people better people – that matters most to the documentary theatre-maker: "You should know this, for we believe you will be better for knowing it. We believe you have an emptiness, and we are here to fill it." This is not to say that documentary theatre is a pleasureless grind -- it can be affecting in cognitive and emotional ways. But in the end, documentary theatre is quite static, the complete opposite of good theatre's being dynamic.

One last point, related to documentary theatre's static nature, and this answers the question (if someone were to ask me this question), "Well, how would you tell this story?" Documentary theatre, in its lesson-giving to the audience, resists implicating that audience in the moral disasters it seeks to explore and explain. We learn about them, but we don't become part of the equation that the documentary sets out to clarify why they occur. Yes, in columbinus, there were nods to the notion that somehow "we" failed the two young butchers, but that was just platitudinizing -- nothing in the performance asked the audience to

really believe that, sacrifice themselves to that idea. In short, the documentary theatre piece really leaves the audience in the same moral and spiritual place in which it entered the theatre, despite the fact that it aims, through its lesson, to get people to amend themselves. But this is as it has to be if you're telling a true story: the strictures of the true story won't allow too much play of the fictive imagination, and without that, there is no imaginative way to pollinate an audience with what it's observing.

What would I do? First, I'd strip away the Columbine reality completely and simply have two young people who want to murder their mates, existing in some undefined time and undefined place. Then I would examine the moral lesson that I wouldn't want people to put into practice: that it felt good to do what they did because of the power they had. I would defend doing this by quoting the playwright Terence: "I am a man; nothing human is alien to me." And I would also try to tell this story in a way would at least make some in the audience whisper to themselves "I, too, have wished I could feel that same power," to tell this story so that we could hear the contra-dictions in our mind's ears about two simultaneous and overlapping true stories: they are monsters and they are human, they disgust me and they are like me. No closure, no summation, no release -- just a ponder on the messiness of our moral lives.

Is this what Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris thought about/felt/mused upon? I don't know, and I don't care because if the facts get in the way of the story, then it's time to jettison the facts in favor of taking a journey through the inconvenient lifescape called the human being. There are more useful and interesting truths than the facts.

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Necro-Political Theatre

(Originally published October 2007)

On Tuesday, September 11, Brian Stack, the doggedly self-promoting mayor of Union City, NJ, where I live, held an unveiling ceremony for a 9/11 memorial planted on a triangle of inhospitable public real estate dubbed "Liberty Plaza," bordered by two major urban roadways that are dangerous to cross to get to the site. The memorial itself is a fairly generic slab of polished dark-grey stone etched with a picture of the twin towers and the usual boilerplate about "we honor" and "we will never forget." At the bottom of the stone, in letters as prominent as the eulogy to the dead, is a citation that this memorial was

commissioned by Mayor Brian Stack, etcetera, etcetera. Call it a lithic form of campaign advertising.

To the right of the slab is a slice of a grey-painted angled steel I-beam jammed into a granite base incised with the phrase "World Trade Center." (I don't know if the I-beam is an actual piece of either tower, but observers are clearly encouraged to believe that it is.) All of this necro-political sculpture is surrounded by a sternum-high wrought-iron fence placed just far enough back to keep any human hand from actually having a tactile connection to the memorialized dead. The artifact is meant to be observed, not cherished, to be official rather than personal, and what is meant to be observed, as is true of most of the memorial sculpture in this genre, is the political power of the living to define the memories that become the exclusive (and excluding) record of the historical event.

This scramble to (re)direct the peoples' gaze toward the meaning of 9/11 reaches something of a frenzy each year in New York on the actual date because, ironically enough, no one can agree on what the six-year old event means. That is, no one person or group has been able to gather the powers -- moral, political, financial -- to emboss the event with an official profile (the way, for instance, World War II is now completely encased in the armor of the "good war" and the "greatest generation," thanks to Ken Burns and Tom Brokaw) . So, in the interim, those who can appropriate it for their own purposes: the President to legitimize an illegitimate war, the governor and mayor to show the world New York's "resilience," Giuliani to promote the myth of his (non-existent) competence, the families of those who died to impose an endless regime of grief and shame. Each of these, and many others, have, by now, dramaturged the event to their own specifications, honed the stage business to a razor-sharp timing, and produced a long and successful run promoting a managed message of doom and uplift. Just like our intrepid and insipid Mayor Stack, they have turned a day of tragedy into cultural and political kitsch.

The fact is that six years out from that day, no one really knows what that day means. Apart from engineering studies that document the physics of the collapse (and all of those are challenged by purveyors of various conspiracies), and the studies that will continue to show how incompetent and blindered was our vaunted expensive intelligence apparatus, September 11, 2001, has deliquesced into a memory, and as with all memories suffers from the intermittent amnesia and selective breeding for message that afflicts all human memory-making.

And what does "means" mean anyway? In one way, 9/11 has no meaning at all, that is, it is not a term in a dictionary that one can look up and get its denotation and connotation. 9/11 is more like a Rorschach print, an arbitrary fractal image upon which people project whatever happens to be roiling around inside of them. This is the only definition of "means" that makes sense in this case.

But this projection of what is inside to the outside is not without some cultural and political discipline and instruction. To be sure, part of the projected package may include completely private fears and hatreds, but these are shined through the larger lens of the indoctrinations and tutorings we have all sculpted, and had sculpted for us, into that thing we call a "self" and an "I." Thus, the importance of creating a "Theatre of 9/11," as did our savvy Mayor Stack, in order to capture what attention-spans, and thus political influence, is out there to be snared.

To be sure, this is cynical manipulation, but it is on a continuum of theatre-making, not its antithesis. All theatre, as does all art, seeks to manipulate a response out of an audience -- otherwise, why go to the bother of making it? (Even if artists make art for themselves alone, I assume that they, the audience of one, want to be moved by what they make.) That continuum can run from what I call "journalistic theatre" (using a current event to teach the audience about that current event) to the absurdist wing, where the audience is meant to be challenged, even chastised, by bafflement. "Necro-political theatre" obviously falls somewhere in-between, though it borrows elements from both extremes: it grounds itself in a current event in order to instruct us about that event (even if that "current" event is six years old -- part of necro-political dramaturgy is to try to immortalize something that is, in itself, time-specific) but also (though probably unintentionally, since necro-political theatre has no irony in it) absurdizes the situation by grafting onto it all sorts of ersatz mythology and religiosity that tip it into the realm of the fantastical.

All of this might be consigned to the academic world (fodder for PhD dissertations) if it didn't have such ramifying repercussions in the "real" world. Necro-political theatre got us into Iraq and may propel us into Iran. It has savaged our civil liberties and hollowed out any will for radical (even moderate) social and political change. And the "enemy" deploys its own necro-political theatre as well, doing a far better job at it than Bush's clumsy apparatchiks.

One cost for living in a virtualized world like ours, where image and a kind of pre-literary, infantile narrative model prevails over nuance and close reading, is an increase in gullibility and destruction. An antidote? Some form of theatrical criticism that peels away the excrescences and shows the nakedness of the Emperor and his empire. And it needs to be a theatrical criticism, using a theatre vocabulary and a dramaturgical logic to lance the boil. Frank Rich is an expert at this (in part because he has been a theatre critic for a long time), as are writers like Alexander Cockburn and Katha Pollitt. But we can't leave it to them since they will never have the reach of a William Kristol or a Rush Limbaugh. Each of us needs to become a savaging theatrical critic of the necro-politics that drive our polity today, or else there will be no polity left to criticize and thus redeem.

Zero Dark Thirty

(February 2013)

The Marvelous Maria Beatriz and I went to see *Zero Dark Thirty*, drawn more by obligation than anything else (i.e., "to be informed citizens, we should go see this movie which has generated such controversy..."). I was also marinated in the back-and-forths pre-and post-release about the torture scenes and the degree to which the movie sanctions torture, authorizes barbarism, etc.

That latter discourse was important and was unavoidable (and I would suspect sought-after, in a subterranean fashion, for the marketing and PR campaigns). The movie tells a lie about the connection between information extracted by torture and the discovery of bin Laden's presence in Pakistan, and that needed to be exposed, since it was feared (rightly) that most people, uninformed about the whole torture controversy regarding the Bush and Obama administrations, would walk away from the movie with an uncritical, and uncriticized, view of the subject.

But now, having seen the movie for myself, I'm sort-of thankful to Kathryn Bigelow for making it, though (as will be seen) probably not for reasons that would please her.

First, though, an artistic critique. *Zero Dark Thirty* is a badly made movie: plodding, ill-written, ill-acted (except for Mark Strong, who always brings power to anything he does) — and did I say plodding? The video-gamish attack on the bin Laden compound was not worth the ride, and it ends with a representation that, to this day, still stands unproved: that in fact the person they shot and then dumped in the sea was bin Laden. A court case is in play right now about releasing the evidence, and it has to be at least a little passing strange that the Obama administration, so quick to tout its terrorism-busting bona fides during the election, balks at showing the world the evidence. (Basis for a new movie.)

But on to the more interesting stuff.

One reason to thank Bigelow for making this piece is that it's a rare time when the citizens of the United States, apparently with the okay of the state, get to see their brutal empire-focused ideology buck naked. Usually it's all tarted up in patriotic garb or fogged over by urgency, but in this case, we get to see the United States empire in action -- we get to see what it does in our name and with our money.

Second, and connected, we get to see how club-footed and inept our empire is. Despite overwhelming advantages in technology and cash, the giant is outfoxed and outrun in the most low-tech of manners, and its vaunted enhanced interrogation program got nothing of any worth while it was a low-level admin assistant, digging through old information, who brings Maya, the agent in charge, the clue that leads her to her end-game.

Third, it exposes just how beholden we are in telling stories to the poisonous clichés about American character and individualism and our cowboy mentality about how we can force reality to bend to our will when we put our American mind to solving a problem. The movie is infiltrated with John Wayne-esque reach-outs (witness Mark Strong standing in the strong sunlight of the hangar door in his tight-fitting khaki pants, blue jacket, and slung-back shades) and homages to the posse of guys rounded up to do the good work in an evil world (what is Seal Team Six but another incarnation of the Magnificent Seven, with cooler gear?). And Jessica Chastain as the tough broad, who can out-man the men and swear with the worst and the best of them but who cries at the end when she's asked where she wants to go and has nowhere to go -- as if this is the only template American artists have for creating a female character.

Fourth, and perhaps most important, it shows how our state is engaged in a war that it pretends it understands but doesn't really. Getting bin Laden a decade after the fact of 9/11 ended up meaning nothing — it won nothing, it stopped nothing, it solved nothing, it ennobled nothing. After trillions of dollars and thousands of lost lives, the United States is economically weaker, less respected, and manifestly incapable of figuring out how to solve its own fate. If the terrorists' intent was to weaken the tiger, they have succeeded.

So, thank you Kathryn Bigelow for unintentionally opening up a window onto the crappiness that is the war on terror prosecuted in our name and with our money. Now, get out of this business of making propaganda pieces for the government, lest you be branded as the war on terror's Leni Riefenstahl, and go make a good movie again.

Red Rover, Red Rover

(March 2013

No, this does not refer to the game but to an episode of *The Mentalist* in season four (May 2012), which, at least for a pretty mainstream police procedural, raised itchy questions about the link between revenge, torture, and justice that also link to our current governmental acceptance of brutality in the service of liberty.

In the episode, a man is murdered by being buried alive — not interred in a coffin but locked in a metal box in an abandoned industrial building. All of Patrick Jane's attempts to get the man he knows is the murderer to confess fail because the murderer is perfectly amoral and thus presents no weakness that Jane can exploit.

So Jane (already driven partly mad by his search for Red John, the serial killer who murdered his wife and daughter) lures the murderer to a cemetery and stuffs him into a coffin in a freshly prepared grave, linked to the outside world by a video baby monitor that he stole from his fellow agent Wayne Rigsby, a new-minted father who had bought one for the baby's bedroom.

Being put into the same situation as the man he murdered finally cracks the veneer — the man is terrified, and Jane watches his terror on the baby monitor, refusing to do anything until the man admits to the murder, which he does, while Theresa Lisbon, his boss and friend, watches the whole thing in both horror and a sickened admiration.

The morality of the torture doesn't matter to Jane because legal process is not his concern — justice is. His bottom line is that no murderer should ever be allowed to escape the murder he or she does, and if legal principles get in the way of getting the truth, then the principles should be ignored in service to the higher purpose of making someone pay for an immoral act. Balance in the world requires it.

Yes, it's only an episode in TV-land, so it doesn't delve into the issues that it raises, but the issues are there nevertheless for review. What are these issues? Is torture justified if it extracts the truth (assuming we can even identify it)? What is the connection between legal rules (which are means to an institutional end) and justice (with its moral struggles about fairness, reciprocal punishments, payment of debts)? Is vengeance only personal, or can there be an institutional vengeance, done in the name of a "people," outfitted with policies and subject to

protocols? Does the end ever justify the means, or do illicit means always infect the end, even if the end result, by everyone's lights, is warranted?

However, as interesting as these questions are, they need to be given a "local habitation and a name" for them to have any weight, and that has to be the United States in this year of our Lord (and probably for many more years to come). I want to say that we are a lesser country after multiple years of visiting mayhem upon the world, but that would mean that we had once been a greater country and had fallen from some sort of grace, and I can't say that. In fact, I don't even know what the word "country" means, since the United States feels more like a crazy quilt of festering lunacies and selective histories than what is usually meant by a "nation" or a "people" — certainly not something from which one could have a fall from grace.

I think we need to accept that if the United States is anything close to a nation or a people at this moment, it is one defined by and ruled by Patrick Jane's practice of vengeful cruelty — but without any of his redeeming, if ambiguous, accomplishments. This cruelty is not only practiced upon the bodies of foreigners elsewhere in the world — we practice it upon ourselves on a daily basis. Given the free-floating violence permeating everything in this culture, at any moment any one of us can be considered outside the pale and ripe for execution. In one sense we have achieved what our rhetoric has always wanted us to achieve, to become a class-free and race-free society, except that now this equality means that everyone is equally in someone else's cross-hairs and one trigger-squeeze away from oblivion. We may think we have achieved a great Enlightenment-based society, but it really is closer to Hobbes' war of every man against every man.

I used to feel great dismay at this disparity between what America is and what it could be if only it would come its senses and do the right thing! (Sorry — got away from me.) Now, I don't think it has any senses to come to — anything that might have been used as a basis for some kind of regeneration of purpose has been sullied or falsified beyond repair, and all that fills the air is shrill complaint and poisonous threat. I don't know what this means for the practice of being a citizen. I don't know what it means for trying to figure out a balance between public witness and private insularity. I don't know what to do, and I don't know how to handle not knowing what to do.

Red rover, red rover, send an answer right over — soon.

So Far, So Good

(April 2013)

In a play of mine, *Light. Fantastic.*, Clu Martin, a writer, in speaking with another character about why he, Clu, tried to commit suicide, talks about how the phrase "What is the point?" hounded him on the day he decided to do the deed. Clu, a recovering alcoholic with a redemptive ache periodically derailed by his appetite, had no idea how to answer the question. But "answerless" was not why he tried to check out.

As he examines why he tried to suicide himself, he finds that "answer" or "no answer" to the question is irrelevant, or at least secondary. What is primary? Each human every day is required by the conditions of his or her material life to choose whether to finish out that day. Humans do many things to counter/avoid/paper over this bruising necessity. But every day life poses the question and requires a response.

This requirement imposes a terrifying freedom. We are free to weave any answer we want to fill the void opened up by the question while at the same time knowing that any answer we generate is, at best, a temporary fiction, thin as air. No wonder so many choose religion or philosophy or shopping to fill the void — anything to keep from having to face the daily certification of our vanishing.

Clu doesn't succeed in his self-slaughter, and by the end of the play he manages to cobble together contentment and place himself back onto the human carousel.

Clu, of course, stands in for me, and I had reservations about the positive-ish ending because I believe answering the question is a more tangled effort than (with apology to Descartes) "I decide to live each day, therefore I am."

Here is how the Clu in me views the tangle. If I choose "life," what I am really choosing is a narrative template called "life" that I use to mold my day-to-day. I certainly don't believe — can't believe — that "life" is a "gift" from "out there" (the universe, God, Dharma, Nature). This life-template is just improv fictionalizing, and I can never not be aware of the fact that I am making it up as I go along, and that it doesn't take much to make it all go to smash.

This pressurizes life for me, always being aware of what an improvised, and improvising, creature I am. I wish I could make peace with being Lear's "unaccommodated man," the "poor, bare, forked animal," and just go with the

improvisatory flow — be a human animal instead of a human being (a human version of my cats, who are primarily present-tense and unimpressed by goals or duties).

Here is the game I play with the asking — really, an actor's game. If things are in tune — good morning coffee, crisp, affectionate cats — then the primary emphasis falls on the first word, with a secondary up-lilt emphasis on the last, all said with curious inquiry: "What is the point?", with the follow-up, "Well, today, let us…." I take that template off the shelf and pour myself into that.

If things are untuned — troubled sleep, poor digestion, pressed for time — then the question comes out differently, with a primary emphasis on the last word and a secondary emphasis on the verb — "What is the point?" — all said in an exhale of exasperation as the self pours itself into that template.

I can switch templates during a day, of course, which provokes its own vexation and dismay. One of the mysteries Clu tries to plumb in the play is the witchy neurochemistry of the brain and its connection to what humans like to think are their core selves — as he questions, just how sacred and fundamental should we hold the notion of a "self" if it can be shape-shifted in seconds by the pleasure molecules of cocaine or flashes of errant electricity among neurons? It is more the case, he concludes, that we live in a state of being continually at the mercy — with our greatest creative challenge possibly being answering "at the mercy of what?" and figuring out how to get out its way before it gets in ours.

The day may come when it's just too hard or too boring to take any template off the shelf and keep on pretending because "What is the point?" has no solid-bottomed answer, like "What does one plus one equal in base 8?" Instead, it's just a prod to make me decide to live for the day — and I'll oblige myself to make that choice until I choose not to feel the obligation — and then we'll have to see what happens.

I often wish I could do this business of living differently, but I'm not sure I'm built to do it any other way. But it is also true that each day I've been able to say "so far, so good" no matter how pointless or uplifting a day has been. With this observation as an ironic gloss, since irony, like quarks, is a constituent part of the quantum universe: A man jumps off a building. As he reaches the fifth floor, a man leaning out the window yells, "How's it going?" and the falling man replies, "So far, so good." Of course, it's the sudden sharp stop at the end that turns the delight of flight into destruction — but, then, that will happen to all of us anyway, so why worry about it? Why try to inoculate, ward off, or divinize it? Instead,

enjoy the flight, even if it seems (or is) pointless, because the real task at hand is for me (for you, for all of us) not to seem pointless to ourselves. Perhaps that is the only usable answer to Clu's question, the only real counterbalance to the sudden sharp stop at the end.

The Squirrel and My Cat

(May 2013)

On April 6, 2013, I was attacked by a squirrel on my back deck while having lunch with the Marvelous Maria Beatriz.

Yes, it is true.

Our next-door neighbor, Tom, picked up an abandoned squirrel pup last year and raised it over the winter in a cage. This spring, he began releasing it into the backyard to explore and do squirrel-things, which he announced to us he was doing as we ate our excellently prepared sandwiches and drank our excellently distilled beverages (a cold Dogfish Head beer for me, a staccato prosecco for her).

Or, to say this another way, he had released into the world a creature that had no fear of humans.

The squirrel came up the stairs to our deck and paused. Given our domesticated attitudes towards animals in our urban environment (that is to say, we forgot they are wild creatures), we thought out loud, "How cute." He climbed up my arm and sat on the nape of my neck, chittering. Still cute.

And then he wasn't as he got it into his squirrel-brain that he should attack me, which he did with great relish, giving me a good puncture wound on each pinkie finger and a trellis of scratches on my hands, forearms, and the top of my head. After his first sally, I threw him away from me; he climbed onto the railing and launched himself for a second attack. The only way I could get him to loosen his bite on my right finger was to grab his jaw from behind his head with my left thumb and forefinger and squeeze hard, like trying to squirt a pit from an olive.

By this time Tom has come up the stairs, and I hand the critter off to him while MMB is helping me stanch the blood flow and get ready to head out to the emergency room. (Wildlife note: squirrels don't carry rabies, though Lord knows what else was plaqued on his claws and teeth — and as we learned later, Tom hadn't ever taken him to a vet, which made sense since he wasn't supposed to have a domesticated squirrel in the house in the first place.)

I am something of a novelty in the emergency room since my ailment, such as it is, trumps the mundane cold or sprained joint. By this time I've

stopped bleeding, but both of my little fingers have swollen and are throbbing, and I'm thinking, "Now begins the tetanus." (Then I remembered that I had a tetanus shot a few years ago after I almost chopped off the tip of my finger with an axe, but at this moment I did not feel the anti-tetanus in my blood. Silly boy.)

Three hours later we're out with a prescription for my antibiotic, and three hours after that we've finally found a 24-hour pharmacy where I can get it filled. (We did get to finish our sandwiches after the hospital, so a little bit of break in-between.) So, six hours spent post-attack — and we have to let the police know about the animal because the hospital is going to call the police as well, as mandated.

The squirrel, it seems, is going to be in a lot of trouble through no fault of its own. Once again, humans muck up whatever they touch.

I'm writing this with Cordelia in my lap, warm and purring and completely trusting and completely non-feral (though cats can shuck off their domestication quite easily — just ask the millions of dead song birds wasted by unhoused felines). Even if we pick her up to cradle her (which she does not like), she never turns savage. She twists and turns and mewls and pushes, but she never attacks — why should she? She knows, in whatever way cats know these things, that we mean no harm, that we'll never mean any harm to her.

This is not the squirrel's life, and it shouldn't be — he shouldn't lose his fear of us because we are not to be trusted — we think we can redesign whatever space we walk into for our own comfort and benefit, even if we have shown to us time and time again that we suck at such interventions and usually only bring havoc even when we think we're bringing improvement. Humans so much want to think that they are better engineers than they are, but whatever improvements have been wrung from the natural world have come at a cost that now threatens to wipe us out.

Squirrel, I don't hold anything of what happened against you. But don't come up on our back deck again because I will give you a reason to fear human beings and bring you back to your senses so that you'll get out of the cage and back into the trees and away away away from us.

Going on 60

(June 2013)

I swore I would not do this, that I would not write about turning 60, that I would not catalogue and comment upon the thousand shocks that 60-year old flesh is heir to — back fat, love handles, less-than-prim erections, random mechanical joint aches, ear hair, nose hair, wavering hearing volumes, wavering vision sharpness, a supine appetite, and 991 more — and yet here I am writing about them. Why?

It's not that I find any heartening humor in these things, unlike the barrage of forwarded emails my mother sends me of the "You know you're a geezer when — " variety. Nor do I find any philosophic comfort in contemplating my aging — I don't find any particular wisdom emanating from it, nor any dispensation, as if I've lived a good life and it's time to let the generations behind me live theirs while I rest on my accumulated laurels, blah blah blah. And the complaining — I have fellow sexagenarians who complain about this and that connected to their aging, and it's depressing to hear the medical litanies, the regurgitated Bette Davis line about "growing old is not for sissies," the lamentations about nostalgia and timidities about technology and over-concern about meal times and gastric problems.

So, again, why?

For me, this coming decade feels fraught — I don't know any other word for it. Rather than feeling accomplished about anything I've done in my life, I feel anxious that I've barely gotten started on creating anything worth leaving behind. I feel that despite a laudable discipline in pursuing my various enthusiasms, I've never amalgamated them into something that someone else would find worth their time to tie themselves to and cherish.

(And does that matter? Is that a sign of failure? What does that tie validate in what I've done? Is the problem in me or in them? Is there a problem at all? These questions and others like them plague me as well.)

I now find being me unrelaxing, and I imagine it might be that way for people close to me. More and more, I lack an openness about and a trust in life — life is something to be conquered, life is a matter of having done enough to satisfy some judge (and knowing that the judge will never be satisfied), it is about a kind of grinding discipline that has no real joy in it either in the moment or in the

accomplishment. To just "let be" without a Plan B — not possible for me, which I think deprives me of serendipity — it all depends on my to-do list, which is the opposite of the serendipitous.

All of this is, at heart, a spiritual problem — a strange thing for an atheist to say, but true — "spiritual" in the sense of finding a satisfaction in living that can outsmart and fend off the oblivion that is living's sole and permanent certainty. This has been a problem for me all my life — to find pleasure and joy where I am existentially that feels like "enough," within which I can sit and feel comfort and completion and calm. (The rare time I feel this is when I've just enough wine to blunt the grind yet still be physically capable — the alcohol turns off the puritanical neurons and life feels expansive and unthreatening.)

But then (I think) — perhaps the jaggedness I feel in my life is meant to be that way, that that is the way I have to live because I am constituted as I am, and I should learn how to use it well rather than complain about the work and doubt and dislocation it causes me.

This conclusion sits well with me, but I don't know if it does because it's right or because I'm too lazy to do the necessary course corrections. It feels right because it feels real. I find myself most at peace when I'm working on a project like the "videos" I've been posting on YouTube for the theatre company because I have accomplished something new and interesting, thus pleasing myself. Yet I also feel annoyed that they don't kick off anything when we announce them — why aren't people more interested in something good? (And then I counter with, "Well, maybe they aren't that good," which provokes a counter-counter about "It's as good as, and better than, most of the crap that's out there" — at which point the discussion has slipped away from the video and into the land of dueling irritations with a geezerish tone. Back away, back away!)

The only thing that brings some leaven into this counter-counter-counter is humor — something that self-deprecates without also diminishing the efforts and accomplishments, that is true humor and not anger masked, that can be ironic without irony's underlying despair and dismay. This is the only thing that ever brings me into a balance — it's my form of finding balance, though one that comes from a kind of see-sawing (jerky and almost ungovernable) rather than meditative harmony (which I always find temporary and unable to stand up to strong winds and noisy encounters).

It is true that I am still enough of a residual Catholic to want to find Eden, where all this struggle will end and peace will reign. I also suspect that Eden is

incredibly boring and not at all conducive to imagination — and is, in its own way, as empty of ultimate meaning as I find in my life and life in general (though it can certainly have local meaning, and has to, or else why persist in living at all — a question to be answered at another time).

As the clock turns over to beyond 60, the only grace that will be a saving one is to find humor and apply it liberally and not take the serious stuff so seriously — or take it as seriously as it needs to be taken, give it its proper honor and respect, and use the humor to at least keep the despair at bay if it can't blunted or amended.

Consider 60 a nice, safe speed — it will get you where you need to go.

The Spiritual

(July 2013)

In music, the "spiritual" sings out about ultimates: grace, haven, grounds of being, doubt, pleading, rescue. It voices comfort and complaint, reaffirmation and reprimand. Under it all, though, is the assumption — no, the certainty — that a listener listens on the other end, that a Promiser offers the Promised Land.

But what does spiritual mean if one cannot believe that a listener waits at the other end of a prayer? Cannot believe that underneath the grave contusions of life an order and meaning, while difficult and sometimes opaque, nevertheless reigns?

"Spiritual" need not disappear just because no one may reside in the Celestial Home. To me, "spiritual" is a vocabulary we can use to talk about the challenges in life that other vocabularies can't adequately parse: instrumental, political, artistic, economic, and so on (though each of these, and others, has something to say about the spiritual — like food on a plate, all vocabularies eventually get mushed together).

To talk about the state of one's "soul"; to focus on ultimate meanings; to lift the body and its mind beyond the immediate and guard them against abrasion and evaporation; to seek out principles for conduct that have more tenacious roots than the instrumental and utilitarian; to craft a "long view" that also doesn't scant the vibrancy (if narrowness) of the short view; to exercise a short view of things infused with the long view; to act with purpose even when no overarching purpose is clear; to have a bias for courtesy in human dealings (oh so hard in New York City — a true Christian challenge is this city!) — these are spiritual self-dealings unencumbered by a Divinity, a pagan-like approach to life that searches for rationalizations to do well rather than ill, good rather than evil, against a backdrop of a cosmic void, crimped understandings, and the ever-present danger of bad wine.

I would, hoary atheist that I am, go so far as to include strictly religious vocabularies as well in this spiritualizing, specifically the Bible's words, not because the Bible has any authority to it (it can't be the Word or words of God if I believe there is no God to word it) but because it offers templates with which to think about the purpose and direction of life. The Fall, from a state of ignorance/innocence into the dirt of self-consciousness: is this not our animal births? Cain and Abel: not only the conflict among blood brothers but also our seeming

destiny as humans to harm those whom we say we love. Jesus Christ: the ache for redemption, for a new beginning shorn of past sins — is this not the American ache for reinvention and moral avoidance? Jesus Christ again: the historical example of how a blood sacrifice is required for even the smallest advance in human dignity and freedom.

These templates, these ready-mades, like all templates, help give a narrative shape to the babble — they are a good way for us to listen to ourselves talking about ourselves (which is the only reason to have and to do art).

For instance, in John Gardner's novel *October Light*, the elderly dairy farmer James believes that life's gravity governs our moral lives — more specifically, since gravity is always actively pulling humans toward the center of the earth, humans must exert an opposite push to rise against gravity's clutches to keep from being decomposed into brute compost, that is, to be driven by their animal natures. This active struggle to delay the inevitable dissolve gives meaning to James' life — and it's not a bad program to follow for one's life in a debauched America where most everything is for sale (and has been sold) and the notion that anyone should sacrifice anything for a greater good is smeared and defamed.

In other words, James' life has a spiritual dimension even though he is not too sure that there is any grand lighthouse keeper showing the way for the wandering ships upon the sea. This vocabulary, this way of telling his life-story to himself, gives shape to the shifting (and shiftless) and populates the void with meaning.

Of course, using, say, the vocabulary of the Resurrection is not the same as believing that the Resurrection happened; it's only about using a palette to paint something, not an affirmation of faith in the supernaturality of the palette. Because I have no faith in the faith that declares a Divinity and thus a teleological purpose in life, all this talk about vocabularies is also talk about jury-rigging our way through our days, doing the best we can with limited information and resources in a world/universe indifferent to our fates.

This can be — is — a tiring struggle since it only ends in death and all successes are contingent and transitory (and except for a few, completely forgotten by everybody). In fact, I think those who choose to find a home in religious faith choose to avoid this struggle — I can't blame them, for whom would fardels bear, but I can't agree with them either — for me, without the thorniness of the path and the sadness of the inevitable defeat, there is no possibility for robust joy and satisfying arrival. Or, in James' words, without the upward stretch against a

ravenous gravity, there is no chance to absorb the sun and be refreshed by the winds. We must take our comforts where we can find them and not expect them to be embedded in a purpose-laced universe like some kind of gold ore that we can mine.

How to end this? Not sure. Only to say that the act of writing this, of deploying words against the void, has brought a measure of (temporary) comfort. What are all human efforts, from pyramids to operas, from conquests to sewer systems, from brewing the perfect coffee to honoring the dead, but exactly this: a momentary comfort in a string of momentary comforts interspersed with the on-going rejection of gravity until it can be rejected no more? This is the fate that the spiritual, as I've tried to describe it, tries to voice, in the hope that we can — I can — live large rather than small, rise high in order to fall in the most graceful, beautiful, gentle way that I can.

Guns

(August 2013)

Several recent essays about guns in *Harper's* and *The New York Review of Books* are notable for the way the authors have sacralized guns and gun owners/ownership, saying that gun users have rights that non-gun users are bound to respect and that the solution to "guns" in our society will come about when non-gun users begin respecting these rights and gun users act as stewards of the public peace by promoting what I can only call the "safe sex" version of gun usage.

This argument is absurd, of course, both as argument and as public policy. So, let's take it apart to see why.

First and foremost are these "rights" — what are they? The Supreme Court did say that gun ownership was a right, but it didn't say that unregulated gun ownership was a right. After all, the phrases "well-regulated" and "bear arms" appear in the same sentence, so the writers must have meant for them to have something to do with one another.

So the resistance by gun users in the name of Constitutional liberty to measures that mean to regulate them — or, more accurately, regulate things like buying/selling and information (through things like licenses, registration, etc.) — is hypocritical because they aren't really interested in protecting the Second Amendment but what I call Second Amendment Lite: all "bear arms," no "well-regulated."

This also means, as a logical consequence of their hypocrisy, that they must consider the 30,000 gun-related homicides a year a necessary blood sacrifice that the rest of must pay to protect their rights — why else would they do nothing to stop them?

Are these the kind of rights, and rights-holders, that any of us should be bound to respect, where gun-user self-interest (not to mention their fetishism about the gun-object itself) is tarted up as public interest and where someone else's pain is considered a proper homage to their beliefs? Not for me, and not for any state that would consider itself well-regulated and in service to the welfare of its citizens.

So, if these "rights" are not to be respected, what about the object to which they are attached? What, actually, is a gun?

Despite whatever else a gun is considered — beautiful machine, symbol of liberty — it is foremost a manufactured commodity that, like cigarettes, if used properly will only cause injury. Therefore, it makes no sense to treat something so dangerous with any kind of veneration when we should be treating it as we would treat any commodity that might cause harm, through the processes we have for product safety regulation. My toaster has to undergo such a vetting; why not something geometrically more dangerous than that?

In addition to product safety regulation, we should also treat guns as a public health problem, just as we did with cigarettes. The injuries and deaths caused by people using easily acquired guns have to be paid for, and there's no defensible argument against why that cost should not be borne, in part, by the companies that make the product that helps cause the injury, just as we did with cigarettes.

Therefore, the "rights" of gun users (and that includes the companies that make the guns) should not trump legitimate concerns about product safety and public health. That they do only proves the power of money and fear to stifle reason and action — and that's all it proves. Sacrosanct rights, individual liberty, the tyranny of government (more on this in a moment) — all a smoke-screen to hide the fact that gun users simply don't want to be told what to do with their manufactured commodities and that they believe their own self-interests in this regard are of a higher order than the interests of individual victims and the commonwealth at large.

Well, what about that tyranny of the government? What about the argument that the state wants to seize the guns of individuals and take away people's freedoms and that the guns are necessary to resist such despotism, in the finest American revolutionary tradition?

Really?

If the state really wanted to take away people's guns, it would take away people's guns. As the owner of the biggest gun on the block, so to speak, the state can pretty much do what it wants to do when it comes to expending violence against the citizens. Sure, there would be hold-outs and pockets of resistance, but the state would win, at least for a time, in part because, even though there 200 or 300 million guns in the people's hands, these gun users in no way resemble a "well-regulated militia." The thought that there would be coördinated push-back by citizens enraged by this assault on their rights is a fever dream.

But the state is not interested in taking away people's guns as a means of controlling them because it doesn't need to do that to control them. There are far easier and more effective ways to cow a citizenry than outright attack, and the state uses all of them right now, from oppressive surveillance to a friendly tax audit.

So, if gun-user rights are really expressions of self-interest underscored by an adolescent whininess about being told what to do; if guns, as products, are dangerous when used as instructed; if the idea that people have to have guns in order to resist tyranny is just a fever dream, what defense is left to justify not changing the situation concerning guns and gun violence in our society?

None.

Gun users, though, are right about one thing: it's probable that gun regulation will not stem the tide of gun violence, at least not in any meaningful way. Gun regulation is about gun regulation, but guns are not the source of the violence — that lies elsewhere in our society. The only way to turn that tide of violence is by basing our society on peace and justice instead of its customary foundations in hyper-individualism, capitalist greed, and willful ignorance (about history, about economics, about morality).

Now, if gun users wanted to work towards that end, I might be more open to respecting the rights they say I should respect about their using guns. But until they come around, then I have no recourse but to work towards making sure they and their manufactured commodities get at least the level of regulation that car owners, barbers, and dry cleaners have to undergo to do their business. Anything less than that (and I'd like a lot more) is just an insult to the people sacrificed to ensure that they get to play with their toys without interruption.

Affirmative Action Reaction

(September 2013)

I hate to say this — admitting it seems like such a defeat of character these days — but, yes, I, a middle-aged, balding, white male, benefitted from affirmative action. How, you might ask (if you believe the reigning Republican theology), did such a perversion of the natural order ever occur?

The year was 1971, my senior year in public high school in a small city in western Massachusetts. I did well in school — good grades, Honor Society, National Merit Scholar, lots of sports, active in the drama society. But my SAT scores hardly rang the bell, in large measure because our guidance office and faculty expected us all to go to UMass Amherst instead of Amherst College and did little to nothing to prepare us for the test. No coaching classes here, no Princeton Review or Kaplan. Just come in on a Saturday, bring your No. 2 pencils, finish the test, and then get ready for the game that night.

In steps Dr. Rafferty. One night I get a phone call from Dr. Rafferty, a local dentist who had graduated from the Harvard Dental School many molars ago. Harvard College had asked him to do some academic scouting in the area. He had been to the school, seen my records, and bluntly asked me if I would like to go to Harvard. Without a moment's hesitation I said yes, and several months, several interviews, and reams of application materials later, I was in.

It seems that Harvard College had charged itself with an affirmative action mandate (though I'm sure they didn't phrase it that way): to increase their geographic diversity by looking for candidates in places they normally overlooked. That's why my name popped up. In their usual review of applications, Harvard would never have given me a first glance: I was no different, on paper, than a bazillion other supplicants at the crimson gate. Yet because the admissions office decided to cast a wider net with a smaller mesh, they gave someone a chance who would never have been admitted to the club if judged simply on the merit of objective scores and balance sheets. To use a science analogy, because they decided to scan the heavens in infra-red rather than their standard visible light, they found new objects to study and thus expanded the diversity of their knowledge.

Contrary to what most people believe, affirmative action began as an effort to erase racial and gender preferences by broadening the pool of potential applicants beyond white males with certain pedigrees — that's why it was

called “affirmative.” In other words, the purpose of affirmative action was not to exchange one bigotry for another but instead to find people whose merits, under the old search procedures, might not have come up on the screen.

Seen in this light, affirmative action is based on the solid American democratic principles of equality of opportunity and the abolition of social injustice. Why does this make people nervous and say silly things (like certain Supreme Court justices) that we live in a color-blind society and that all we need to do to end discrimination is to stop discriminating? Is that all it really takes? Then what were all those decades of civil rights battles for?

I am what affirmative action is about: an effort to include those who usually don’t get included in the rituals where power, money, education, and chances get handed around. If everyone deserves a fair shot, but everyone is not getting one, then someone has to step in and, as Captain Picard would say, make it so. If we as citizens forgo this responsibility, if we as citizens don’t demand that our government defend equality and justice in our name, if our President (affirmative action beneficiary that he is) doesn’t mount a vigorous defense of affirmative action on its own merits and instead lets the Visigoths have their way, then what’s the point of having an American democracy and being an American citizen? Case closed.

Necro-Political Theater

(October 2013)

This scramble to (re)direct the peoples' gaze toward the meaning of 9/11 reaches something of a frenzy each year in New York on the actual date because, ironically enough, twelve years out no one can agree on what the event means. That is, no one person or group has been able to gather the powers -- moral, political, financial -- to emboss the event with an official profile (the way, for instance, World War II is now completely encased in the aspic of the "good war" and the "greatest generation," thanks to Ken Burns and Tom Brokaw).

So, in the interim, those who can appropriate it for their own purposes: the President to legitimize illegitimate political order, the governor and mayor to show the world New York's "resilience," Giuliani rising like a wraith to promote the myth of his (non-existent) competence, the families of those who died to impose an endless regime of grief and shame.

Each of these, and many others, have, by now, dramaturged the event to their own specifications, honed the stage business to a razor-sharp timing, and produced a long and successful run promoting a managed message of doom and uplift. Adding in the endless battles over what should be a proper memorial on the site and the on-going real estate lust that has given us glass-encased useless skyscrapers, they have turned a day of tragedy into cultural and political kitsch.

But what does "means" mean anyway? In one way, 9/11 has no meaning at all, that is, it is not a term in a dictionary that one can look up and get its denotation and connotation. 9/11 is more like a Rorschach print, an arbitrary fractal image upon which people project whatever happens to be roiling around inside of them. This is the only definition of "means" that makes sense in this case.

But this projection of what is inside to the outside is not without some cultural and political discipline and instruction. To be sure, part of the projected package may include completely private fears and hatreds, but these are shined through the larger lens of the indoctrinations and tutorings we have all sculpted, and had sculpted for us, into that thing we call a "self" and an "I."

Thus, the importance of creating a "Theatre of 9/11" in order to capture what attention-spans, and thus political influence, are out there to be snared,

especially when we have another president ginning up the machine for another war.

To be sure, this is cynical manipulation, but it is on a continuum of theatre-making, not its antithesis. All theatre, as does all art, seeks to manipulate a response out of an audience -- otherwise, why go to the bother of making it? (Even if artists make art for themselves alone, I assume that they, the audience of one, want to be moved by what they make.) That continuum can run from what I call "journalistic theatre" (using a current event to teach the audience about that current event) to the absurdist wing, where the audience is meant to be challenged, even chastised, by bafflement.

"Necro-political theatre" obviously falls somewhere in-between, though it borrows elements from both extremes: it grounds itself in a current event in order to instruct us about that event (even if that "current" event is a dozen years old -- part of necro-political dramaturgy is to try to immortalize something that is, in itself, time-specific) but also (though probably unintentionally, since necro-political theatre has no irony in it) absurdizes the situation by grafting onto it all sorts of ersatz mythology and religiosity that tip it into the realm of the fantastical.

All of this might be consigned to the academic world (fodder for Ph.D. dissertations) if it didn't have such ramifying repercussions in the "real" world. Necro-political theatre got us into Iraq and may propel us into Iran and Syria. It has savaged our civil liberties and hollowed out any will for radical (even moderate) social and political change. And the "enemy" deploys its own necro-political theatre as well, doing a far better job at it than our government's clumsy apparatchiks.

One cost for living in a virtualized world like ours, where image and a kind of pre-literary, infantile narrative model prevails over nuance and close reading, is an increase in gullibility and destruction.

An antidote? Some form of theatrical criticism that peels away the excrescences and shows the nakedness of the Emperor and his empire. And it needs to be a theatrical criticism, using a theatre vocabulary and a dramaturgical logic to lance the boil. Each of us needs to become a savaging theatrical critic of the necro-politics that drive our polity today, or else there will be no polity left to criticize and thus redeem.

Float Tank

(November 2013)

A recent issue of *The Nation* had an article on float tanks -- sensory deprivation chambers that people pay to enter in order to ream out the modern technological sludge gumming up their senses and their thoughts.

Since the article appeared in *The Nation*, it took the journal's expected politico/cultural turns. The writer, Neima Jahromi, brought in Thoreau to counterpoint arguments made by the tankers regarding the stresses of (and solutions to) modern corporation-curated life. He also mused about whether the sense of self-redemption that tankers experience could be a trigger for social changes that would reduce income inequality and the corporatist-induced urge toward overwork. Sherry Turkle and a group of like-minded writers appear speaking about the insubstantiality of self and social connections caused by clicking on too many hyperlinks and having too many open browser tabs and how we need to hit the off-button to get back to basics.

I guess.

Maybe.

Though such speculation feels about as substantial as the water upon which the tankers float, in part because it simply reprises an old American superstition that the way to social reform is best done through the reform of the self -- the e-z revolution, no barricades needed, the kingdom of God to come by and by. And we all know how well such self-focus has worked in creating an egalitarian compassionate society in America.

But underneath the silliness, or at least thinness, of tank-mentality and digital anxieties simmers a fertile uneasiness about balance in a life curated by corporate interests, an uneasiness which is, at heart, religious: what would human life be like if the kingdom of God on earth in fact arrived tomorrow?

I've just finished Reza Aslan's *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. Shitestorm of reaction across the Internet, of course, but the most interesting thing about the reaction is the idealism that drives it -- "idealism" meaning, for me, a straining towards the perfect and the perfected by a species evolved (irony of ironies) through selection by imperfections, otherwise known as evolution.

This idealism, whether it adopts Aslan's revolutionary Jesus or the Pauline Redeemer as its herald, is at heart a hunger to understand the source and purpose of human suffering and to figure out what can be done to stop it, otherwise known as "the kingdom of God on earth."

Is this achieved by active political resistance? Is it achieved by floating in a dark tank? What is the proper mix of private and public moralities upon which to found the kingdom? Can the kingdom dissolve the territorialities of self that spark violent conflict yet still maintain the benefits of individual conscience and freedom? How much violence can we use to achieve peace before the violence overawes everything? And so on, and so on.

This struggle can even be seen in the recent knuckle-headed arguing over debt ceilings and government shutdowns because embedded in the shouting are notions about how much suffering government should or shouldn't blunt in the lives of the citizens. Governments are, from this angle, attempts to make the kingdom manifest in people's lives.

But the kingdom of God on earth in corporate America -- a balanced life in a regime built on manufacturing unbalanced appetites -- idealism achieved through our bought-and-sold political system? Maybe the tankers are right -- best to withdraw to one's own kingdom and soothe one's own suffering. But they are right in the way that adolescents are wrong when teenagers think that they are the only ones to have ever suffered the travails and embarrassments of growing up. It's a limited perspective, and one destined to degrade after a short shelf life.

Because outside the tank, someone controls the water, someone controls the materials that make-up the tank -- the electricity, the property, the time we are allowed to allot to any leisure, all controlled by not-you -- "you" meaning not just the singular you but also the plural "you" of which your personal "you" is a part -- the commons, the common-wealth, the kingdom -- under assault by the "not," exploited daily for profit, privatizing the legacy, making you superfluous.

The American version of the species needs to stop amusing itself to death so that it can wake up and give itself a fighting chance to correct what needs correction and build a kingdom worth living in before the end-time finishes the work it is already doing.

Or it can continue to float on its own minor oceans, in the dark, encased, and soothe itself into irrelevance.

What Is An Economy For?

(December 2013)

I had a clashing of texts recently: *How Much Is Enough?* by Robert Skidelsky and Edward Skidelsky, two opposing reviews of the book (in *The Nation* by Jackson Lears and T*he New York Times* by Richard Posner), and the magazine *Good Housekeeping*.

The Skidelskys' book is, in the end, about happiness -- more specifically, dealing with the question "Is happiness anything that can be created by a capitalist economic system?", something distinguishable in kind and degree from pleasure, contentment, satisfaction, "maximization of return," and so on. Their answer is mostly "no" since happiness, defined by the duo as a good life well-lived, is antithetical to capitalism's constant self-devouring drive towards growth fueled by the manufactured instability of desires.

Posner disagrees with their critique, seeing the leisure created by increased productivity being squandered by a species more likely to engage in bloodsport than cultivate their humanities. Capitalism, as iniquitous as it is, is a discipline, a governor on human frailties, and as such a great producer of inventiveness and abundance -- even if much of the latter does not go to the producers of it.

But even Posner can't explain away the irritating ache that the Skidelskys provoke by asking the question - the ancient, pre-modern, pre-market question - that has driven much philosophical inquiry: what is the purpose of all this human motion and ingestion and respiration and inquisition? This is a question that capitalism cannot answer, founded as it is on open-ended want and the imperative to never say no.

Good Housekeeping, which the Marvelous Maria Beatriz and I get as a free something for doing something we no longer remember doing, and which resides usually in the bathroom within easy reach for a quick skim, is a capsule of these strains. On the one hand, it equates happiness with laser-focused self-fulfillment through cosmetics, exercise, positive thinking, fashion, freedom from clutter, workplace etiquettes - simple things that help one make the calibrations necessary to keep oneself in harness in order to continue being a productive consumer and laborer in the capitalist order.

On the other hand are the articles and fictions about emotional bonds to family, deep and deepening loves, the "thingness" of "Hints from Heloise" and good food lovingly prepared - actions and items whose value resides in part in

the haven they provide from the onslaught of consumerism and the acid dissolve of constant advertisement.

On the one hand, be a good citizen of the capitalist regime; on the other hand, resist the dissolution of things held close and dear that create a thickness of self and a narrative with heft.

Is there a way out of this jam? Aside from shunting oneself off to the monastery or nunnery, the only solution is constant resistance to the Borg of capitalism. Resistance is not futile - in fact, it's the only thing that will save the soul. Perhaps we need to reconfigure Timothy Leary's "tune in turn on drop out" for our desperate age as _____ - I'll let you fill in the blank.

Just be sure to fill it in. An obscenity, to me, has the following elements:

2012

Not Here

(January 2012)

- Engorgement -- also enlargement, tumescence, gluttony
- Rage — at the waste caused by outsized selfishness
- Regret — if things were not so enlarged, selfish, and wasteful, how less dangerous it would be for the vulnerable in the world
- Thus, my play "Not Here"

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Jeff Boss sends Barack Obama a note.

CHARACTERS

- Jeff Boss
- Sniper
- Collateral Damage
- Innocent Bystander
- Voice of Warning

MISCELLANEOUS

Sound cues throughout

JEFF BOSS at a table, with a notebook, a la Spalding Grey. A digital voice recorder and a cellphone are also on the table.

He is nervous, agitated. He looks overhead: faint but noticeable, the rotors of helicopters. The sound is not imagined.

He turns on the voice recorder.

BOSS

I've already sent you one of my broadcasts already, Mr. President, but I don't think you really listened to it not really

BOSS pulls a letter from the back of the notebook, but before he says anything more, he looks overhead again.

BOSS

Can you hear them the helicopters they pass themselves off as news copters the morning tunnel traffic but they're not focus focus

The helicopter sound does not go away but continues, subsonic, as an underscore, coming in and out as the helicopters change position.

BOSS opens the letter.

BOSS

Your response it's a form letter form letter and that's not your real signature I don't think you robosigned a bill from Europe so you can robosign from anywhere "Thank you for your communication" "I listened to it with interest" I don't think you did, Mr. President, I don't think you did either listen to it or with interest

A police siren approaches and passes. BOSS waits, gathers himself.

BOSS

Focus

Another police siren approaches and passes, trying to catch up to the previous cruiser. BOSS turns a page in his notebook.

Helicopters still in the background.

BOSS

It's [date of performance] Mr. President this is my second communication to you I think your staff didn't really let you hear my first one which is why I'm sending you this second one because I think time is running short is running out I really do for all of us for me and for all of us I was walking through Port Authority the other day half a dozen soldiers in camo lined up on either side with pistols and rifles and for what some of the NYPD cops also had rifles for what I didn't feel any safer with all of these weapons around all this testosterone do you really think this scares the terrorists no because it's not about the terrorists it's about making all of us scared and keeping us in line because that's what governments do like to do that you like to do I have to say with regret because that's the kind of president you've turned into a scaremonger

BOSS stops to listen. Something that sounds like a footfall, a second footfall. Then nothing.

Helicopters still in the background.

BOSS

You've become a horrible president I say that with great respect and great regret not only about making promises and not keeping them but being worse than the person who came before you I mean that non-elected one we carried for eight years you don't think voting machines can't be hacked and from a distance it's just like the way those drone operators kill at a distance you brought back military commissions and never closed Gitmo Gitmo so Marine and never rolled back all of the invasions of the fourth fifth six amendments in the Patriot Act warrantless wiretaps still going on NSA

The cellphone vibrates. BOSS looks at it but does not pick it up. It buzzes and buzzes until it stops.

BOSS

Torture is still going on and you want the power to put Americans in Gitmo forever if you think if you think they did something you didn't like that you didn't like ever hear of habeas corpus whose got the body now it's not just the liberties stuff you should be ashamed of I mean you've turned the White House and Justice Department and the Department of Hopeless Security into these machines for making us slaves without putting any chains on us

The phone buzzes again. Two more footfalls. Helicopters still in the background.

BOSS

You and the non-elected guy before you just tell us to go shopping so that we can make the economy go north again that is just stupid when you don't do anything to put a muzzle on the Goldman Sucks and Citigropes and Bank of Charge 'Em Five Bucks To Use Their Debit Cards and put the wolves next door to your office who are only going to take care of their wolf buddies and when some people finally just can't take anymore how the game is just rigged against them and decide to do something pretty inoffensive like take over a public park and say the 99 percent is mad as hell and won't take it anymore and why should we and instead of respect from you for making sure the Constitution still works by really testing it out they get torture done back to them by thugs paid for by public money our money in our name and there's no big vomit in the society about how they got smashed for speaking their minds because the stage

set by you and the non-elected guy in front of you makes it okay the default option to use violence against something you don't like like Libya who gave you the right to start another war you should've been impeached and Afghanistan is like you have to prove to somebody that you're tough by making sure young men and women die on your watch that was the whole thing with Bin Laden wasn't it that you could say I can kill with the best of 'em this from the president who got the peace prize but who doesn't have the first idea of what a peaceful world would look like or to make it come home to roost I bet you got a hard-on

BOSS stops, looks abashed. He pauses the recorder. He gets up to pace — his pacing is circumscribed, as if he were in a small room — or thinks he's in a small room.

A footfall. Helicopters. Cellphone buzzes. He puts his fingertips on the phone.

BOSS

It's a burn phone no one not supposed to

He pulls back his fingers, as if singed.

BOSS

Well of course they're doing it you idiot

BOSS sits back down, checks his notes, and unpauses the recorder.

BOSS

Sorry I shouldn't have said that about the hard-on because this is not about making it personal or slander ad hominem I don't think I have much time regime change about Libya I was saying something I don't understand because you're building a regime here that really should be changed that we should change but people are stupid about this they squeal about socialism and government control but they don't seem to mind being controlled by corporations this myth of the free market and business savvy and private is better really look at the poor the homeless the hungry the jobless the regime has taken such good care of us they give us Black Friday black all right like the death of sanity and reason and still people won't give it up the kool-aid like the joke from the Catskills where one woman says how rotten the meals are and the other woman says yes and such small portions too there is better there is better there is better

BOSS pauses the recorder again. This time he looks forlorn, forsaken. He paces again, looks up at the helicopter sound. Two footfalls. He unpauses the recorder.

BOSS

I am a patriot but not a patriot of the state a patriot of the heart not the flag-waving and bodily pain and punishment kind of patriot but a patriot of the it could be so much better so much better for everyone and my heart is my heart is my heart looks at actions your actions the actions of people you have trusted and shouldn't have and sees the road not taken and feels this really deep emptiness about how it could've been and wasn't and we fooled ourselves by placing all this hope in you even though you asked for it begged us to do it because we should never put hope in anyone hope is foolish we need to build a fire and keep your feet to it and make sure that the game gets rigged our way for once and not be such suckers for stupidities like first black president and

BOSS stops, immensely sad. SNIPER steps into view, aims at BOSS.

BOSS

I could continue the list but you know what you haven't done I don't think there's any time left for you to do it right you've already wasted time and money and bodies it has cost us a lot and I don't think we should pay you anything like respect any more

SNIPER fires. The gun's report is amplified to a painful level. The bullet smashes into BOSS' back and through his heart -- blood spatters everywhere.

The bullet continues through BOSS' body to hit COLLATERAL DAMAGE in the audience. The impact flings COLLATERAL DAMAGE against INNOCENT BYSTANDER, who screams, pushes away and back from COLLATERAL DAMAGE's corpse, crawling over any audience member who is in the way if need be.

VOICE OF WARNING comes into the theatre, quickly surveys the scene.

Helicopter sounds rise. Police sirens rise. The cell phone buzzes on the desk.

VOICE OF WARNING

You've gotta get out of here now. Get out! Get out! Now! Now!

Smash to blackout. Sounds continue for a second or two more, then cut out.

Political Theologies

(March 2012)

I don't want to write about this, but it's impossible to remain silent when our politicians, and the whole process that saddles us with them, has become our enemy — or, thanks to the Occupy movement, the enemy of the 99%.

This has to do with the infiltration of corporate DNA into the body politic and the ascendency of "market-think," the theology of an unregulated invisible hand arranging reality in the most efficient way possible, undisturbed by the human suffering caused by the inevitable inequalities that capitalism generates.

Is this not the kind of politics that the current congeries of Republican candidates put forth, with the addendum of a fierce faith in the power of the individual to single-handedly alter reality by sheer will power? This is a faith, by the way, largely without a basis in fact — as Elizabeth Warren has said, no one makes it entirely on his or her own. And it's also an effort that these putative masters of the universe have never had to make, given the privileges and access they've enjoyed.

But at even more fine-grained levels, corporatism has infiltrated the process. In a recent *Nation* article on redistricting, those in charge of the process gerrymander districts so that they can gather in one place the voters they need to stay in office, just as companies like Apple and Amazon and Google try to commandeer consumers into their "walled gardens."

The Supreme Court, through the Citizens United decision and many other decisions that go unreported, constantly reinforces the authority of corporate institutions over individuals, to the point of alchemizing these institutions into individuals and defining actual individuals as simply adjuncts, not the masters, of these organizations.

The lobbying powerhouses, the money it takes to get elected, etcetera, etcetera — none of this is news or surprising, but its known-ness doesn't diminish how bilious and scurvy the whole business is.

This is not to say that people — actual biological people — are utterly powerless in this process. When the electorate gets jolted into awareness — the Keystone pipeline, for instance — they can bring transformative power to bear. But it seems that the situation is one where the electorate must always be in the position of chastising those it has elected to do their job in representing them

and not their corporate paymasters — and the minute the pressure is eased, back to their skullduggery they go until the electorate gathers enough voltage to rouse itself again. It's an exhausting process.

I do have fantasies about things that could throw a wrench into the machine to show off its illegitimacy. I muse about a "vote strike": what if they gave an election and nobody came? Or a version of that: everyone writes in "None of the above." Constitutional amendments: making all elections publicly funded at every level and limiting the campaign season to six weeks; abolishing both houses of Congress and replacing them with a unicameral legislature; limiting Congressional sessions to three months out of the year.

But, really, it's all fiddling while Rome burns. I read a book like Tony Judt's *Ill Fares The Land* and weep because it will never happen here. I read Terry Eagleton's *Why Marx Was Right* and realize how limited and rachitic is American thinking about liberation and rebellion. The United States is exceptional, all right, in that we lead in none of the categories that define a healthy and well-cared-for citizenry but take best of show in dealing out death and disaster around the world. And we can't seem to help ourselves better ourselves.

The city on a hill has turned into a Trump tower.

Authoritarian Musicals

(April 2012)

Our niece, Belén, from Argentina, visited us for a month as a celebration for her 21st birthday, and as part of her de rigueur experience of New York City, she wanted to see musicals. Now, the Marvelous Maria Beatriz and I are not musicals-goers, but we are excellent hosts, so off I trundled to TKTS to see what was on the board. Eventually we saw *Mary Poppins* (Belén had performed in a version of this and knew all the songs), *Rent* (at its new digs at New World Stages), *Phantom of the Opera*, and Bette Midler's fever-dream juke-box production of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* — nine hours or so of the art form.

Man, it was not easy for me. Luckily, Howard Barker came to visit.

In his seminal *Arguments For A Theatre*, in a chapter titled "Fortynine asides for a tragic theatre," he notes two things about musical theatre: "The authoritarian art form is the musical" and "[When] you emerge from...the musical, you are anyone's fool." He doesn't elaborate much more on this theme in the book, but one can understand what he means as he describes how he hopes his Theatre of Catastrophe will demolish the transparency, lesson-making, sentimental naturalism, and suffocating ordinariness of both the commercial and non-profit theatre world in order to score in the theatre-goer a "wound" that liberates spirit and mind.

Was there ever an art form that promoted the very things Barker wanted to dissolve than musical theatre? Was there ever an art form that short-circuited logic and made conformist morals and politics palatable than musical theatre?

A case in point. Much of the advertising for *Mary Poppins* centers on the "magic" of the story: imagination and childhood will refresh the spirits of a reality-weary world. But what does this "magic" really mean? It means what the Wizard of Oz meant: "Don't look behind the curtain; just let what we offer wash over you; there is no need to think."

Well, I confess, I sat there and thought about what I was seeing — couldn't help myself. And once one starts thinking about what is actually going on behind the Oz curtain, *Mary Poppins* is a profoundly weird piece: a capitalist fairy tale.

Her name may be in the title, but the center of the story is not the witchy nanny but the banker father (fittingly named Mr. Banks) who comes close to

losing his position for making a decision based on his heart rather than the numbers. (Aside: there is fascinating traffic in the question of whether Ms. Poppins is a good or bad witch, or even a guardian angel. But for another time.) He has put his family in jeopardy by his actions, and if he loses his job, his family will suffer not only financial ruin but class come-down: they will be no different than the chimney sweeps populating the roofs of London. (Do they never take a pee-break? But for another time.)

This thrum of anxiety runs throughout a good portion of the play, which Mary tries to will away through her shenanigans with the children, but to no avail: if the father loses his job, they will lose the "magic" of their bourgeois lives, and what had once been flying (like the kites, like Mary herself) will be earth-bound and rubbed raw by reality.

However, this is Disney. The father's heart-made decision pays off royally, while the one that looked good in the numbers ends up bankrupting those other banks who took the gamble with what turns out to be a charlatan scheme. Not only does he keep his job, he gets a promotion and a raise as well as apologies from the bank president. His response to his good fortune: he wants to spend more time with his family, with which his employers readily agree.

So, the father gets the girl, so to speak, and the proper order of things is maintained: the bankers will continue to bank, the sweeps will continue to sweep (with all the lung-ailment perks attached), the bourgeois children have avoided deep pain, and Mary's work (that is, saving the middle class from itself) is done as she literally flies off into the sunset (i.e., to the second balcony out over the audience).

Undisneyfied, it's quite an interesting story, but the copyright-grip is so tight on the work (the Mary Poppins books started publication in 1934, and the movie was released in 1964, so good luck on this coming into the public domain anytime soon) that one would be legalistically suicidal to render a new rendition of it.

The crowds streaming out afterwards were, to use Barker's phrase, "anybody's fool," softened up for the hard-sell of the Poppins tchockeiana along the walkway out of the building and invited to have one's picture taken next to the iconic figure of Poppins up-up-upping away with her umbrella (as if one could, with just the right kind of wish, lift away from the sordid streets....) While they believed they had been offered a "magic" story, where the whimsicality of childish imagination refreshed the adult spirit, they in fact had been inoculated

against the Occupy-Wall-Street mentality, reaffirmed that the right people got the right things and the world as they know it is the world they should know.

Phantom — what has kept this beast going? I think even Barker would be stymied in trying to extract any conformist content from this lumbering bucket of bolts. The story is about a serial murderer that the audience is expected to pity and love, in emulation of the doltish young singer, his protégé. If there is any lesson here, it might be that art would be better if not invested in by greedy businessmen, since it's the avarice of the new owners to put people in the seats that leads to morally damp and aesthetically rachitic choices — but that's really a pretty undercooked surmise.

Priscilla has all the aesthetic nutrition of cotton candy, but it does have the moral and political virtue of making gay people, especially transvestites, and transgenders undangerous to the goodly crowd as long as they remain on stage and are visible for only two hours a night entertaining us with bright costumes and excellent voices. The musical version flattens what the 1994 movie created and defuses completely any risk or danger in service to a message of tolerance for difference, the courageousness of blended families, and the seemingly genetic legacy that gay people have for gaud and carbonation.

In other words, it keeps those "others" in a politically and culturally useful place: lauded as entertainers and artists but never to mistake that admiration as acceptance or advocacy.

Rent was tolerable and energetic — I still think it's one or two drafts away from being as tight as it could be, but Mr. Larson won't be making edits to it anytime soon.

What I think Barker is getting at is that musicals work the way Huxley's "feelies" worked in *Brave New World*. Their under-purpose, which lies beneath the surface purpose of "putting on a show" and "making some money" (and this under-purpose may not be evident to the creators, the way we we're not aware of the surge of blood against our veins), is to mute the cultural and moral violence at large in the society, either by employing "magical thinking" to lift us to other lands or foreground a minstrel message of tolerance that makes us feel momentarily good or numbs the neural circuits with the novocain of pure spectacle (e.g., chandeliers and helicopters). They are the artistic equivalent of fast food, satisfying without being nourishing.

They do this, of course, because the producers do need to have asses in seats to make their nut, and perhaps even some profit, and they won't get that

by creating something that pisses people off (unless the tongue is firmly wedged in the cheek, such as *The Book of Mormon*, in which case none of the satire does any serious damage). To appeal broadly also means to appeal superficially.

But the nature of the beast has something to do with it as well. Musicals, to work, have to flatten the material and the characterizations, making their creators rely upon well-worn tropes, rhythms, and psychologies to fit the work into the constraints of time, space, and audience-attention. It has to move forward at all times, which gives the audience no time to ponder, review, disagree, disapprove — the audience is never invited to review, only to obediently take in what others have decided to give to them.

These tactics — obedience, spectacle, flat portrayals, tested narrative forms, standardized psychologies, the gestures toward some sort of uplift, escape from the outside culture — are not only the elements that Barker refers to when he calls musicals "authoritarian" but also the elements that an authoritarian society uses to captivate its citizens, such as is done in American society these days (e.g., the presidential campaign process). Musicals are a good art form for authoritarian societies because they mimic what authoritarian rulers do to maintain power — there is not that much distance between Mary Poppins and Nuremberg.

I do not mean to tar all musicals with this brush. Sondheim's output, by and large, shows a man struggling to make the art form do something different with every outing, and people like Rinde Eckert, in pieces like *And God Created Great Whales*, or even Laurie Anderson, use music in theatrical ways to delve and divine.

Okay, so I wasn't scarred by the experience, and I have a pink ping-pong ball from *Priscilla* that will bring back fond memories of Belén's visit. But why musicals are so successful in our culture, crowding out other forms of theatre, bears some thinking about — at least during intermission while one gulps down the $4 wine in the plastic cup.

Two Poems About Writing

(May 2012)

On Writing A Poem After A Great Absence

This paper is an ear with no mouth,
water no dowsing can raise.
This pencil bleeds silence.
This hand plows left to right,
harrows breathing to silt.
The bones of the eyes rattle.
And nothing. Still.

Certain bacteria, rinsed of motion,
can sift to arid depths and wait.
For years. Until a sass or spark
jazzes clocks and appetite
and they render venom a food
or kill in thousands.

What membranes are still permeable here
ache for penetration,
the nucleus arched for splitting --
waiting for the first nick of rising water
to razor through the rind of old defeats,
pare clean the callous of an empty voice.

At night the radiators crackle and boil;
heat strops its edge on walls, on windows.
Sills, jambs, floorboards are whittled
then soaked and sing in creaks and wrenchings
as they grow. And the wood of the desk.
And of the pencil. And of the paper.
The nuclei filled with water and knives
sprout in the eyes that crack and fuse
as the world unearths itself
again. And again. In endless syllables
that slaughter dismay, revive the dust.

Logjam

I watch the logs choke the river. My pen is ready.
Are they, perhaps, like some brief mosaic,
a garbled weave? I write,
cross it out.
Better yet, a bratticing of fate,
where men tread lightly, wary of
the errant butt, the snatching birl --
Maybe.
Cross it out.
Beyond transcendence, then, I cast them upward,
choral staves of nature's music,
the whole large stanza of their birth girdling
the faint diapason of nature itself,
and men, bare grace notes in —

The lines resemble the logs themselves,
uncouth, barked, sap-sweating,
limbless, pleached, forced and straining,
nothing beside the clatter of sun
on the helmets of the men, the brindled water,
the coarse obstinance of logs jammed tight:
the wooden words of an olding man waiting
for the current to get free.

I Want to be Shallow

(June 2012)

Came across an interesting quote in my reading of Slavoj Žižek's *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce* from Elfriede Jelinek, winner of the 2004 Nobel Prize in Literature — Americans would probably best know her through her 1983 book *The Piano Teacher* (Die Klavierspielerin), made into a movie in 2001, though Jelinek also has created a large body of work for the stage. The quote comes from an essay she wrote, "Ich möchte seicht sein" or "I want to be shallow":

> I don't want to bring strange people to life in front of an audience.... Characters on stage should be flat, like clothes in a fashion show: what you get should be no more than what you see. Psychological realism is repulsive, because it allows us to escape unpalatable reality by taking shelter in the "luxuriousness" of personality, losing ourselves in the depth of individuated character. The writer's task is to block this manoeuvre [sic], to chase us off to a point from which we can view the horror with a dispassionate eye.

It is Žižek's use of the quote, as well as the quote itself, that drew me into writing this month's essay. Žižek uses it approvingly as part of his discussion, in the initial section of his book, about how to usefully critique a society's ideology when one is both embedded in and saturated by that ideology (in the United States' case, the ideology of a rampant capitalism). He uses Jelinek's words to make this point:

> Our most elementary experience of subjectivity is that of the "richness of my inner life": this is what I "really am," in contrast to the symbolic determinations and responsibilities I assume in public life....The first lesson of psychoanalysis here is that this "richness of inner life" is fundamentally fake: it is a screen, a false distance....One of the ways to practise [sic] the critique of ideology is therefore to invent strategies for unmasking this hypocrisy of the "inner life" and its "sincere" emotions. The experience we have of our lives from within, the story we tell ourselves about ourselves in order to account for what we are doing, is thus a lie — the truth lies outside, in what we do...."Stories we tell ourselves about ourselves" serve to obfuscate the true ethical dimension of our acts. In making ethical judgments, we should be story-blind...

There is so much richness here, it's hard to know where to begin sampling it. Let me begin with something personal as a playwright. More than once, after readings of one or another of my plays, I'll get responses/suggestions that I should give more "backstory" to the characters ("I'd like to know more about...").

Most of the time I do not give my characters "backstory" because I find such stuff boring in plays and usually dramatically inert (and I always forget the backstory, or forget to apply it, as the action moves forward). This doesn't mean I don't give my characters antecedents for the action I put them through on the stage, but I try to keep such things minimal and forward-moving — no reminiscences for the sake of a reminiscence (when a character intones "Do you remember when…", I sigh).

I make that aesthetic choice for a reason: the stage is a "present-tense" zone to me, even if the subject matter touches on past history, because when the lights go up I want the audience plunged into media res or immediately confronting the Passover question of why is this night different from all other nights — the equivalent of streaking down the runway to vault the saddle at top speed. Again, this doesn't mean that there aren't references to past things to explain present actions, but I try to make that "past" as present-tense as possible so that flow, voltage, uncertainty do not get interrupted in the work of carrying the audience along.

If my actors want to create backstory for themselves, if that helps them do their work, then I have no problem with their doing that. I also say in response, when they ask me if this or that element makes sense for their characters, that as long as it makes sense to them and doesn't impede what I want to accomplish in the play, be my guest. I'm just not that interested in the process to care about what comes out of the oven.

But, being who I am, I also mull over what seems to be this constant in commentary about my work and try to understand better why I write backstory-thin. In the end, I think the reason I don't embellish my characters with confected biographies is that it feels false to my understanding, after 60 years on the planet, that what we think of as a "human being" really has no essence to it and is made up as we go along.

More to Žižek's point and it's connection to writing plays: the real question is not "What is a human being?" but "What is a human being today in the United States?", "today" and "United States" being the larcenous capitalist regime under which we struggle. The answer to the question is mediated by everything that this regime requires us to be in order to produce the profit and inequalities it is engineered to create. Thus, Jelinek's "psychological realism" is not a description of some "essential" quality of being a human, inherent and enduring, but an ideology, a story we tell ourselves about ourselves in order

to justify the power relationships in our society (otherwise known as "the way things are," with that tone of fatefulness about it, as if we cannot change them).

But why does Jelinek find this "realism" repulsive? She first says that it "allows us to escape unpalatable reality." But she doesn't mean "reality" in some generalized ahistorical quasi-philosophical sense but a contingent reality, in a place and time — that is, of the regime of our particular form of capitalism. And is our reality "unpalatable" here and now? My answer would be "yes."

The mechanism of this escape for Jelinek lies in the "shelter of the 'luxuriousness' of personality." "Personality" is a focus so narrow that it isolates the human being into "individuality" and "identity" and then further into "personal responsibility," and thus nullifies (or at least cheapens) all the "extra-individual" forces that connect that individual to history and contingency and, in the case of capitalism, captivity.

A case in point. The most recent *Harper's* has an article on a group called "Underearners Anonymous," which uses the 12-step program structure of Alcoholics Anonymous to "help" people come to grips with their depressed economic conditions — as if "force of will" or "the power of personal dream" could bend uncontrollable conditions to individual advantage. This is a case where "personality" ends up being used for self-blame, with its resulting political quietism, when it would be more healthful personally and socially to turn that disappointment and anger outward in political action to change the rotted and rigged system that has put them where they are.

To lose "ourselves in the depth of individuated character" is an ideological practice, then, with this corollary: writers who write so that audiences lose themselves in "individuated character" are ideological writers, whether they consider themselves that way or not. This is not a judgment about ability or integrity or good faith or anything like that — it is descriptive of a role, of a practice, so that one can write with as full an understanding of one's actions as possible, which is what Žižek suggests in the extended quote above: "'Stories we tell ourselves about ourselves' serve to obfuscate the true ethical dimension of our acts. In making ethical judgments, we should be story-blind…"

Does this require writers to write with the kind of "dispassionate eye" that ends up creating boring theatre, full of Sam-Beckett-like flat-screen personages engaged in esoteric and opaque action/non-action? I think it argues for the opposite, for a different kind of richness than what passes for "richness of character" these days, where the personages that the writer puts onstage are

nodes on a large net called "the world as it is today," not isolated worldlets hovering in singular orbits.

It is also important to remember Žižek's point about "critique" and its relationship to ethics: if we write from this different sense of fullness, and if we write with a kind of "Zen amnesia" — that we forget what we know in order to find out what we know, what Jelinek calls "shallow" — and if we write with the intention to emancipate people from this brutal failure called capitalism, then we will write ethically.

I look forward to hearing from you.

The Fever Dream of Captain America

(July 2012)

A play by this title, written by me, recently finished a short run at the Metropolitan Playhouse in the eighth year of the East Village Theater Festival, an annual presentation of plays written about life on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

The play's story is simple: an FBI agent, American by citizenship but born in Egypt, seeks to recruit informants at a local mosque, and towards this end pulls in a cab driver who prays there and amuses the other cabbies with the story of Steve Rogers, a.k.a. Captain America. Except that the cabbie calls it the "fever dream" of Captain America — the fever that comes from a taste for dominance but no stomach for empire, from a self-congratulatory story that America brings justice wherever it goes constantly betrayed by the venalities and meanness that power requires to stay in power.

The agent, to squeeze the cabbie, tells him that telling that story will be considered a threat to the United States unless he coöperates, and in the end the cabbie can only twist and evade so much until he has to choose what he had to choose the moment he sat in the agent's chair. Being enlisted in the fever dream is like being attacked by one of Ridley Scott's aliens in *Prometheus*: it worms its way down your gullet, then explodes your heart from inside.

And so goes the American fever dream today, this bloody swamp of spite and whining and selfishness and social/economic injustice. All of which might be tolerable if it didn't cause such literal injury to the body politic. Just one example: the documented way extreme income inequality increases illness and death among the lower depths. The more you don't have and can't get, the more your mortality is shortened: proven.

And yet we, as a society, agree to let this and other indignities happen (even if many of us as individuals disagree). Like the cabbie, we're enlisted. As in *Prometheus*, we incubate the fever.

What am I doing? I write my plays. Which is to say, what I do is like pissing on a forest fire. Yet I don't go join myself to any number of groups who are fighting a good fight to drain the swamp, or at least keep it from flooding everything, because there is an Eeyore part of me which says, "What's the

point?" There is a perverse satisfaction that comes from watching the train wreck in action — not proud to admit that but cannot deny it either.

Perhaps the futile gesture won't prove to be futile, maybe the good works people are doing will accumulate into a critical mass that will break the fever and bring people back to kinder hearts and less spleen. But I also think a much more massive intervention needs to happen, an old-fashioned mass political movement that goes beyond the soft-touch niceties of the social media, where people are willing to build barricades (physical and virtual) and throw their bodies on them.

My fever dream is another revolution that goes beyond the airiness of Occupy Wall Street and re-anchors this self-professed Judeo-Christian democratic culture in the Christianity of liberation theology, the Judaism of tikkun olam (repairing the world), and the democratic energies of Eugene Debs, Michael Harrington, Dorothy Day, and [fill in the blank of your favorite rouser of rabble].

Unless you like the current fever dream. If that's the case, let's talk — I'm curious to find out why, since it makes no sense to me.

Our Mediated Lives

(August 2012)

This year, for the third year in a row, the Macy's fireworks fired off from the Hudson River.

This meant, once again, that Brooklyn and Queens lost out, and lost out (again) to New Jersey, indignity of indignities.

Boulevard East, in Weehawken, becomes jammed with fireworks-watchers, who come wandering in about mid-afternoon to stake out their sites. The first wave usually consists of the photographers, who post themselves to the railings and walls to get their unobstructed views.

Then behind them comes the really extraordinarily diverse waves of people, a vigorous mix of Asians (ranging east/west from India/Pakistan/Bangladesh to the Philippines and north to China, Japan, and Korea), African Americans, Spanish speakers from every country in Central and South America as well as the Caribbean, and probably from geo-religio-ethnic categories that exist on no census form or in any sociology textbook.

Their colors, their voices, their foods and musics and passing-the-time games — these are the real fireworks, the real spectacles, the real reason to be at this gathering at all.

As for the fireworks themselves — at a certain age, it is true to say that once you've seen one Macy's July 4th display, you do not ever have to see another one. They went up, they exploded, they came down, repeat, repeat.

What struck me this time, though, was this, which is why this entry has the title it does.

At 9:20 p.m. or so, as the first rocket pierced the evening, a forest of arms arose, like Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane, except that instead of branches in their mitts, the people held cameras of all kinds. All of a sudden, all attention to the event became filtered through the device, and people spent time watching through the screens, scanning the pictures they'd just taken, taking some more, sending some off to other people (the woman next to me sent a photo, with text, to someone else in the same crowd, as if they were not sharing the same experience).

It reminded me of a story told by Bruce Babbitt, who was the Secretary of the Interior in Bill Clinton's administration. He watched a group of Japanese tourists at the Grand Canyon as one person, with a Polaroid camera, took a picture of the others lined up with the Arizona sunset in the background.

Snap. Out whirrs the photo. And the group gathers around to experience that solar wonderment by watching the Polaroid develop, ignoring the actual sun as it sets.

The device mediates the experience, and something is lost in the translation/transaction. Theatre, of course, is a mediating device as well, as is all art, but art functions differently, not only filtering in and filtering out but also, in the best-made devices, requiring us to respond to the mediation in some way that touches and moves us beyond the ordinary and the habitual.

And that's what it was like on Wednesday, July 4.

Except for the children, who only had their unmediated eyes to do their looking. As usual.

Sociable Contract

(September 2012)

As a wordsmith I both hate and love it when reality casually throws up a phrase for which I would have given my gold crown to fashion. (Of course, this state of flummox doesn't stop me from using it as soon as possible, with the added benefit that I don't have to footnote it.) This happened the other day as I talked with a man updating the insurance map of the property where I work. He had to catalogue on the map any changes he found so that the company could know what its policy covered.

He explained to me, in more detail than I wanted, the importance of keeping tabs on how a property gets used, and used not just by the owner. "For instance," he pointed out, "if people come through a hole in the fence at the back of the property and cross the parking lot to get to the street, and that goes on long enough, you've got an easement, even if you don't have an official one on the map." The industry had a name for this phenomenon, and here the man unknowingly spoke poetry: "Ripening shades of title."

What a deliciously accurate phrase! Let it mull in the mouth for a moment, like a bite of just-ripe Bosc pear, and then taste its truth. What better captures the dynamic process of evolving into a human being — that we become more human as our "shades of title," the claims we have upon each other as a consequence of being born, "ripen" into a sweeter empathy for one another.

But am I simply being carried away by felicity into believing something that isn't true, just another sloppy sentiment, like "We Are The World"? Let's test it. As I sit alone at my word processor, one thing is patently clear: I am not alone. My wife futzes in her office; the traffic slurs on by. One block east, people queue up to get on the NJ Transit buses; one block north, shoppers pull into Tower Plaza. But even if I were ensconced on the highest mountain, I would not be alone because physical proximity is not the issue. I or any of us can exist only if we are embedded in a thick matrix of human invention. Whether I like it or not, the quality of my life depends upon the company and kindnesses of strangers.

Which leads me to another truth: Everything I do, and everything everybody does, has a consequence, either helpful or harmful, for someone else. Think of this as the difference between a mosaic and an automatic transmission. As one of the tiles in a mosaic, I am certainly not alone; I have all my fellow tiles around me. et I am stuck; I can't even know what's happening five or six tiles over.

The mosaic is a passive system. In an automatic transmission, though, motion creates changes through hydraulics; in the same way, human society, through its own labyrinthine system of pressures and responses, creates constant flux and morphing. These shifts, in turn, evolve "title," by the simple fact that no one is unaffected by what anyone else does. We have claims upon each other's existence whether there are six or six thousand degrees of separation.

Then there are the "shades." Like any color scheme, the "shades of title" run from dark to light. Nothing says that the claims people have upon each other must nourish or preserve. Nor does "ripening" always lead to the dusky glow of a full-juiced peach. In many places, for instance, the shades of title there are decidedly dark, and the ripening of these claims has led to slaughters of all degree. Such infernal growth is not theirs alone — the world sometimes seems over-ripe with deadly claims.

But one thing is clear in looking at this infernal garden: no one really wants a world like this. The actions of its players may fall within the category of "human" because they are done by humans, but morally, most people condemn them as "inhuman." What does that mean? It means that what many consider essentially human, as opposed to a simple categorization of human actions, takes on a different shade of title, one tilted toward compassion, responsibility, recognition of common aims and aspirations. And to "ripen" into this kind of human being requires effort, self-discipline, study, humility, a sense of humor, reduced ego -- being civilized is an acquired state, not one that comes naturally.

I suppose that a good society, one concerned about the shades of title each has upon each, would nourish that kind of ripening, that we all have "ripening shades of title" to each other, ties that bind even the remotest Inuit to the Namibian village elder. Or, more locally, that connect a carful of riders on the "C" line on a Friday morning heading into 42nd Street to each other, no matter how much they avoid eye- and body-contact and shuffle along as if they are floating islands unconnected to the main.

Ripening means evolving. his our sole task as human beings; otherwise, nothing can really mean anything worthwhile.

Mini-Aurora

(October 2012)

On Labor Day this year, the Marvelous Maria Beatriz and I, using some free tickets for AMC theaters, went to see *The Dark Knight Rises*. I wanted to see it because I am thinking of writing a new piece with the shooting in Aurora (Colorado) in mind and thought it would be good to see the background image for that event. (Otherwise, I wouldn't bother — Christopher Nolan became a laborious film-maker once he had large budgets in hand: after the sleek *Memento* and just about the time of *The Prestige*. But another topic for another time.)

So off we trundle, going to a theater complex we usually don't frequent, at the Newport Mall in Jersey City. We don't go there because, for want of a better term, it's "low-class": place is not as clean as it could be, the smell of melted cheese and nachos wafts through the air, and one can barely hear the movie over the rattling of ice in super-sized drink cups and the crackle of hand after hand digging into the super-sized bags of popcorn.

And mobile phones — lots of glowing screens in the crepuscular dark.

Sigh.

I am sure every reader of this piece has a mobile phone peeve, if not several — for the MMB and I, one of ours is phone use during movies. Being who we are, we don't shy away from asking people to put their phones away, often several times during a showing, but it gets harder and harder to do so when the response is invariably a snarl-back that anyone would infringe upon their sovereign right to act like jerks in a public space.

I don't want to get into any "decline of civilized standards" screeds — that's not the point of this piece, at least directly. The point has more to do with the shooting in Aurora — as shocking as that was, we shouldn't have been surprised at all.

To my left, with one seat between us filled with her shopping bags, sat a young girl, maybe 14 — to her left, as we found out later, sat her father, though at the start of what I am going narrate, he was off buying "supplies" for the movie.

Lights come down for the barrage of pre-feature trailers (a part of movie-going I happen to like — I think trailer-making is its own genre of movie-making), and out comes her phone for the texting. So I lean across the seat and ask her to put the phone away. She said she's texting her mother. I said she should step

outside to do that. She said that the movie hasn't started. I said that for some of us it had. She said she would take two seconds. I counted out the two seconds for her (I admit, a bit of jerkish behavior). She turned the phone off. We all go back to watching.

Some minutes later, out comes the phone again for another text. This time, the MMB, sitting to my right, crosses in front of me, and much more forcefully than I did, in a much less requesting tone, asked her to put the phone away. (You must picture Maria Beatriz to imagine this: a four-foot-seven former nun now a social work manager at a major New York hospital, often referred to as "sweet" or "darling" by her co-workers but carrying the nick-name from her childhood of "leche hervida," or boiling milk: she can summon the fierceness when needed.)

The girl, after offering back the snark appropriate to her station in life, puts the phone away. Calm on the Western front for the moment. At some point between this and what I'm about to narrate, the father returns (who, for the record, also pulled out his own phone several times to check, I assume, his stock investments — we said nothing because, well, who wants to spend his or her entire time at the movies not-watching the movie policing phone use?).

There was also some back-and-forth between the daughter and father which I could see out of the left-corner of my left eye, with some finger-pointing and body-language pointing at us. Just about the time Bane, the movie villain, blows up the stadium (and a good chunk of New York City as well), she pulled out the phone again. So, it being my turn, I lean over to her and ask her what is so important that she needs to use the phone now.

The father sprang into action by throwing his super-sized soda in my face and standing up to yell at me not to disrespect his daughter. (Note: Mayor Bloomberg's campaign to restrict sizes of sodas may have a beneficial effect in situations like this.)

Out of the corner of my right eye I see Maria Beatriz book up the aisle in search of a manager — leaving her bag behind. In front of me the father and daughter are gathering up their grub-stake (which included a skateboard — I assume hers but given the adolescence of his response perhaps his) and heading up and out the opposite aisle. I stand drenched, stunned but not particularly frightened, more concerned about Maria Beatriz's whereabouts than anything else — and weirdly, if only briefly, worried about whether anyone else nearby got splashed. So I grab Maria Beatriz's bag and pursue her.

So, here's the choreography in the lobby: Maria Beatriz is gunning for the manager on one side, I'm trailing her on the opposite side (damp and bag-laden), and the father and daughter are behind me, with him barking at me (though all I could really hear through the fog of urgency was "disrespect" and "daughter" — but I got the message).

At this point I was getting really annoyed with the whole situation because, on a lower frequency, I knew what was going to happen: the staff would call security (who would arrive too late) but not restrain the patrons because they're not allowed to; the duo would scuttle away, leaving Maria Beatriz, the staff, and I sort of picking our butts while everything de-pressurized; I would be more busy making sure Maria Beatriz lost her fear and anger than, say, plotting revenge scenarios; and the sugar water would be getting stickier and stiffer as it dried.

And that's pretty much how it worked out.

After I laved off what I could (and finding out, too late, that the bathroom only used these strange hands-insert air dryers, not paper towels, leaving my forearms and face moist, though the hands did get nicely treated), we went home (two free passes in hand, courtesy of the abashed manager) and began the process of understanding (abetted by two lively gin-and-tonics on the back deck).

What did happen?

That depends upon whom the spotlight illuminates.

For Maria Beatriz, her musings focused on how quickly she morphed from the person described above into a seething berserker, rage-filled and battle-primed. In part, yes, because she was protecting a loved one but also as a component of her character, the demon beneath the civilized veneer — and she did not like this one bit since it contravened her preferred notion of herself as Buddhist and compassionate.

In other words (at least to me), it made her more interesting to herself.

For me — when I recalled the sequence of things — I don't remember any moment when I felt scared. There wasn't an instant, say, when it crossed my mind that the man might have a weapon and that I was in danger because, I think, there was a trust underneath that saw the situation as silly and as unnecessary rather than as a prelude to pain. I didn't grow up in violence, I don't engage the world through violence, so I don't expect the world to violence me as a matter of course — which is, I guess, the welcome legacy of a happy childhood.

It also occurred to me, both at the time and later, that codes of courtesy, which are also rules about self-governance, substitute for law enforcement, and when someone doesn't have those codes, or is ruled by more self-centered codes (machismo or paranoia, for instance), then one has to call in the cops. Courtesy is more efficient than policing because policing is always a hammer that sees the world as a nail, but courtesy also requires a commitment to a personal face-to-face — to an intimacy that crosses tribal borders — and it also requires that pleasure be taken in a small degree of self-denial (e.g., it feels good to me that the person goes through my held-open door before I do). This is something that more and more people have lost a knack for, or more likely a taste for, individuated capitalist atoms that we are.

And then, of course, the topic of violence itself, given the movie we were watching and the reason why I went to see it in the first place. I would not say that the movie and the father are linked causally — that the violence on the screen prompted the violence in him. It would be nice if it were that neat, because then we could make reasonable restrictions on the creation of violence as entertainment and keep a great load of crap from being broadcast.

Nor would I say that movies like this and their downstream ilk, like video games, dissolve moral fiber, creating a permissive atmosphere that encourages [enter conservative jeremiad here on the decline of western civilization]. Plenty of other forces with more powerful solvents, such as the capitalist system itself, have done this erosive job. The "circuses" part of "bread and circuses" is just a simple spoor thrown off by these forces, not a generative perennial root of them.

But there is a link somewhere among this father, the Aurora shooter, this movie, and a general sense that American society is, as Yiddish would say, facocked (in any one of its variant spellings), no matter how diffused or vaporous the connections since no society can be so compartmentalized that what happens in the east has no effect on the west. Societies can be, and should be, very leaky.

Perhaps here is a starting point, in a counterfactual. I'm glad the situation had not been reversed, that Maria Beatriz had been the one attacked, because I am quite sure I would've been on top of him in a heartbeat (though I've never been in a fight in my life), feeling both enraged and exhilarated and without a care as I gave or took whatever lumps came my way — in an odd sort of way, liberated. From? From ordinary life, ordinary guilts, the ho-hum terrors of

mortality, the grind of responsibility — in other words, the aggravating weight known as maturity, as adulthood.

And maybe that's the starting point of this link: violence, even the vicarious but also certainly the actual, is an effort to feel vitalized, adrenalined and connected, if only briefly. It is also supremely egotistical, mercifully freed from the hectoring of compassion and obligation. What a relief not to have to answer to anyone or anything! And then the next question: what is it that we have done (and not done) in making the structures of how we get our living together as an American "we" that makes such (human) behavior practicable and frequent?

I don't know if I have the powers to tease all of this out — but, perhaps, dear readers, you do, in which case, please offer what you can to all of us.

In the meantime, Maria Beatriz and I will go to another theater as soon as something comes along worth seeing.

Memento Mori

(November 2012)

On Sunday, August 26, 2012, something happened.

Of late, I have lost all my mirth — speaking Hamlet-ish. If not that, then certainly I've taken on a grouchiness, a testiness, towards many elements of the routine life, including the very routineness of life itself. A shifting, as I thought of it, over the border into geezerhood.

I needed to shield myself from this grind, shield the ones I love from the grind as well, since they've done nothing to deserve this abrasion and dismissal. But I couldn't figure a way to do it, couldn't find the chink that would allow me to wedge in the lever-tip and pry off the whole crude stunted artifice and chuck it away.

So, I took myself on errands to the store, just to get the loved ones out of firing range, and the solution came to me unbidden, as these things are wont to do — during the washing of dishes, say, or the pulling of weeds.

What if that day — Sunday, August 26, 2012 — were to be my last? And I knew fully that this ending was coming. Knew that at midnight, all would be over — not in pain, not through self-violence or outer violence, but just finished. Lights off. Bells' reverberation stilled. How would I spend this day? (I gave myself one restriction: the day had to keep the character of any usual Sunday that Maria Beatriz and I would spend — it had to stay ordinary.)

Perhaps "unbidden" is not entirely true: the coming death of my sister's dog, Gabbie; my own thoughts about the mortal coil; the sometimes suffocation of ambition for my writing. But however the neurochemistry works in situations like this, it crafted a from-left-field suggestion that, because unforced by will or anxiety, made sense out of disparate parts.

So what happened?

Almost immediately — not a rush, really, more like a slow sifting, came a feeling of gentle-making humbleness. But it needed help to take hold, since it had to work through a thick veneer of bitchiness, and so I kept repeating to myself some variation of "Remember to remember — this all ends today, so pay attention in case you can take it with you." Over the day the humbleness worked its way through as the self-reminder took on (dare I say it?) the tenor of a prayer — not of supplication but of commemoration — memory-making — because even

the smallest gesture turns precious when the experience of it may be the last of its kind.

And so patience returned. And the noisiness in the head dimmed out. And it was as if I could breathe again, see again, hear again, love again.

We biked, we made pizza, we cleaned the apartment, we checked our emails, we read in bed, we fell asleep. I remember looking at the digital clock as I turned off my reading light, seeing that it glowed "10:30" and thinking, "An hour and a half to go — and it has all been excellent." I knew, of course, that most likely I would be up the next morning, but I pretended anyway that that was not the case, that in 90 minutes I would no longer be there. And the thought that I had lived the day as best I could with the one I loved the most brought immense comfort to me — the humbleness had worked itself all the way through. Her breathing was the last thing I heard before dropping off to sleep.

People often talk about living each day as if it were their last, but it's not something that can be done by an act of will or reason. Something has to break (open) for it to work, something has to agree to let sadness and love work together to wash away regret and anger and turn fear (of loss, of pain) into focus. Above all, at some level, the coming end has to be believed, even if the odds are against it — the power of "what if" will make us feel the truth of "this is the end," the same energy that creates art or prayer or excellent food well presented, a rehearsal for what we know (we know!) is coming.

Monday was the same, but it was different. I am the same, but I am different as well. I lived a day as if it were my last. I am still breathless about it, still breathing about it.

Meeting John Doe

(December 2012)

I have always been a fan of Frank Capra's 1941 movie *Meet John Doe*, a tale about a media-created celebrity co-opted for political gain by his creators. It's something of a third part of a trilogy of movies, the other two being *Mr. Deeds Goes To Town* and *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*. Each of these movies falls victim to Capra's tendency to substitute sentimental notions about the goodness of American character and democratic values for a more incisive look into the situations his narratives raise about class inequality and economic insecurity (what critics of Capra called "Capra-corn").

Meet John Doe is no different. It includes things like a paean by the grizzled newspaper editor to Lincoln and Jefferson being "lighthouses in a foggy world," John Doe's speech about the "little punks" pulling together to create a tidal wave of good will, a feel-good ending that contravenes the arc of the story that precedes it (with which Robert Riskin, the screenwriter, disagreed strongly).

What draws me to the movie is the seventy-year old story underneath the Capra-corn that is as fresh as the election held last month because we live in a celebrity-confected age where there is no levee between politics and entertainment and where our democracy should be more properly called a "participatory fascism." (D.B. Norton, the newspaper owner who authorizes the creation of "John Doe," wants to use the enthusiasm of Doe's followers to form a political party that will impose obedience and authority on the American people. He is our homegrown Mussolini who believes democracy has lost its voltage because it's made too many concessions to the wrong kind of people. Sound familiar, i.e., Romney's 47%?)

In 1941, the Screen Guild Theater did a radio play version, and there is a musical theater adaptation as well. But there's never been a dramatic stage version created. Until now.

On October 9, 2012, the company I co-founded, Block & Tackle Productions, put on a reading of *Meet John Doe*, adapted from the Robert Riskin screenplay for the stage. The adaptation, from shooting script to stage script, went quite easily, once I had figured out stage equivalents for what Capra did with the camera. Here's a list of the decisions I made concerning the stagecraft:

> *Characters*: Of course Capra could job in any number of actors (such as the rogues' gallery of bums who offer to be John Doe). What I did was have two

> actors (male and female) play utility roles (e.g., the editor's secretary, John Doe's bodyguard) as a way to present a cavalcade of characters without breaking the budget.
>
> *Scene Changes and Sets:* I hate it when plays becomes about the set changes between scenes, so I like to build in fluid shifts, where characters can walk out of one space into another in two seconds flat. To allow for this, I've created the minimum needed to set a scene, which can be moved on by stagehands or (I prefer) the actors themselves. It's something of the equivalent of the fade out/fade in that film can do.
>
> Projections and Sound Design: To streamline things further, I've built in a strong projection and sound scheme, even to using clips from the original movie.

All of that technical finagling is engaging, but the more challenging work comes in making the story dramatically interesting. Not that Riskin's story isn't. Here's a thumbnail description of the plot:

> In 1941, a newspaper wanting to increase its circulation runs a scam when it creates a fictional John Doe, an Everyman who has threatened to jump off the roof of City Hall on Christmas Eve to protest the injustices of the world. They then hire a man needing money to impersonate this John Doe, as they call him, with the stipulation that on Christmas Day, he disappears with his payment in hand. However, his "protest" catches the attention of the nation, and an inadvertent political movement begins, co-opted by the owner of the newspaper for his own political ends. It all concludes on the rooftop of City Hall on Christmas Eve.

But its rendering on the page and screen has a 1941 feel to it, and Riskin was working under Capra's direction, so (as I'll explain in a moment) it couldn't take a direction Riskin might have wanted to take.

So the challenge to me was to keep some of its "1941-ness" (especially in terms of the dialogue's pace) while making it also feel contemporary without necessarily "contemporizing" it by updating it. I did this in a couple of ways.

First, wherever possible, I kept Riskin's original words, but when they felt too cornpone or folksy or just too un-modern, I "hardened" them by stripping them of various locutions (such as using "well, okay" to preface a statement that John Doe makes) and keeping the conversation line as clean and direct as possible. And where something that Riskin used didn't fit my story idea, I changed it to what I wanted to hear.

Second, I also wanted my story idea to be "harder" than the story that comes out in the screenplay. In Riskin's work, John Doe (whose real name was John

Willoughby, played by Gary Cooper) and Ann Mitchell, the originator of the scam (played by Barbara Stanwyck), sort-of stumble into the evils they perpetrate. Doe is shown as a basically decent man who becomes fooled by the wolves of the world, while Mitchell suffers a crisis of conscience about how she's let herself be used to create the fiction and aches for redemption.

I wanted them both to be more active in the decision they make to go ahead with what they know is a dishonest scheme, so I made them both more decisive about the course they choose to follow, in part to cleanse them of the kind of sentimentality that people use to excuse others from being held responsible for their actions. Both John and Ann know what they're setting up, and even if events pretty quickly get out of their hands, they know full well what deals with the devil they have made.

Finally, I wanted the end of the story to be "harder" than the one Capra settled on -- I wanted the ending to be the one that Riskin argued for but didn't get. Capra wanted uplift at the end, but Riskin argued that the only course of action, given the story they'd set up, was to have John Wiiloughby take the jump John Doe had promised to take, now that everything had been lost and Willoughby's life had become a sham. I sided with Riskin in my version.

So, there it is, a fresh-minted renewal of an old movie that keeps the feel of the original without getting mired in nostalgia while freshening it up without obliterating the original by making it completely contemporary.

2011

A Brief History of Writing By Design

(January 2011)

History

Log shards under
maul's blow

(I feel the edge
split my skull,)

until rhythm and steel and
sharp tang of riven oak

(gnaw occiput, cleave atlas,
banish pelvis until)

conspire to breathe a man
out against dumb matter

(I fly symmetric, one half
landing in the fire,)

and set him hacking self
from what will warm, will name

(the other seasoned to
word, line, breath, poem,)

him.

By Design

I used to work for the Salvadori Center, an educational not-for-profit that uses the design of the built environment for an interdisciplinary project-based study of math, science, social studies, language, art, and technology. "Built environment" means not only tunnels, bridges, and skyscrapers but also the systems -- cultural, political, economic -- that build the built environment. The Center does this K through 12 in the New York City public schools.

I'm not a "design professional" by trade or training, but one couldn't hang around the Salvadori staff for long -- trained as they are as architects, engineers, mathematicians, and artists — without acquiring a "design point of view" about the world. In fact, I've come to the conclusion that the best way for me to make sense of the fractalcality of human life -- its fractal, loose-bordered nature — is to

see it as a built environment designed by deliberated choices to make things one way rather than another. "Deliberated" does not always mean rational, orderly, just, or sensical — it only means that some humans somewhere at some time set in motion processes based on whatever they thought made sense at the time. It also means that that "sense" does not have an intrinsic moral character to it — "sense" can mean fair-minded or foul, equitable or exploitative, intelligent or stupid. The "sense" only needs to be coherent, as in "cohere," to stick together.

What does this have to do with theatre -- the making of theatre, the understanding created by the making of theatre? Perhaps of all the disciplines labeled "art," theatre has the largest "built environment" component to it. Not only do we build spaces in which we present theatre, but the stage itself, the literal and the symbolic stage, is an environment designed to produce something in the people invited to populate the space during a time called "performance."

To go even further, each play performed in the designed space re-designs this space -- in other words, each play creates a new built environment (usually called "the world" of the play) that, in its presentation, determines to bring the audience to someplace other than the world that careens just outside the exits.

As I pointed out in my last essay, "What Is/What If," most theatre-making has a bias towards the production of accessible "sense," usually governed by a story-telling mechanism that aims to produce light and, if possible, something like redemption, and it makes conservative use of the built environment to do this, mostly by giving a priority to "reality" through stage setting and lighting.

But the wonderful thing about the built environment of the theatre, as opposed to the built environment of the "real world," is that it need not be constrained by the needs of that real world -- any world can be built on the stage, even worlds that try to dissolve any concept of world itself, of coherence itself. Anything placed on the stage immediately acquires the power of metaphor. And furthermore, that theatre world can dispense with the constrictions of morality and politics -- it need not achieve light or order or redemption or anything "feel good."

In short, used well, the designed world of the theatre can help us penetrate and navigate the built environment we call a "self." Because each human being is a designed creature, designed from the outside and the inside, and what we might call "organic" or "whole" is simply a design that meshes our inside and outside in a workable synchronicity. What better way to investigate our devised selves than through an art like theatre that thrives on "devision"?

Many other elements about this notion of the designed self please me. First, I think it's immensely liberating. I am completely responsible for who I am because, whether I've done it badly or well, I have made every decision that has fed my design. I am also freed from ghosts, that is, from beliefs that my self-roots are anchored in extra-material origins, such as the supernatural or the divine, or in past trauma or in solipsistic regrets — only I have made me who I am, not gods or spirits or past monsters.

Second, being thus liberated, nothing human alienates me, which leads to a much diminished need to judge the rightness or wrongness of anything, which in turn frees me from smugness and sanctimony. There is no eternal right and wrong, only contingency and interpretation, and while such existential looseness may terrify people and convince them to take up ideologies and principles as blockades and stop-gaps, it is also the source of the freedom to re-conceive the self as the time-driven re-design of the self requires (otherwise known as "life").

For me, then, my career as a playwright (and I mean "career" as a mash-up of both its meanings: a "course of continued progress" in "a headlong manner") is to design a theatre to be performed in the built environment of a theatre that, at one and the same time, mimics and dissolves and repatriates the designed theatre of a human's being. I am not interested in the tedious business pantomiming or repackaging the real world onstage — I can't do it that well, anyway, and many others can do it far better than I can. I'm more interested in this exploration of other worlds, other designs, other possibilities, that leave the self open and do not design it into a "too too solid flesh" too soon. If art has any claim to intrude on our "ground time" here on earth (to use a phrase by poet Maxine Kumin), it has to be its ability to keep us open without convincing us that any one design is the ultimate, final design, to remind us (and remind us again and again) that "designing" is what "being" is about.

Untouched

(February 2011)

I heard a good story from my friend, and while I haven't been able to source it, it has such truth to it that I want to use it any way as the subject of this essay.

When Muppet-creator Jim Henson died in 1990, his wife Jane was asked to relate a memorable moment about him. She chose to tell a story about a family trip to Italy and a visit to the Sistine Chapel. As they all looked at Michelangelo's work, Henson said to his assembled clan, "Only a hack would have had the fingers touch."

I've just finished reading 85 fifteen-minute plays for a New York festival, and in so many of them — so so many of them — the fingers touch. The playwrights seem uninformed about the fact that drama — what we call the "power of theatre" — resides in the space between the fingers. That is, in the space between bodies, in the rests between words, in the arc of a gesture starting here and ending there, in the not-saying of something, in the not-choosing the obvious path.

Too many of the writers instead elect not only to have the fingers touch but jam into each other, causing the aesthetic injuries that come from too much noise and not enough mystery, too much on-the-nose and not enough suggestion.

All interesting things in human life come from the tension created by the almost-touching, the not-quite-said, the what-is that really is not. Year after year, when I read these scripts, the writers continually make the mistake that what's important is their words. The words are just the launch pad for the real drama: the magnetic fields among characters; the gravities imposed by the space of the theater, the audiences' breath, and the weight of expectations; the capsizing of beliefs -- all the things that words can cause but are not in the words themselves but in only the carnal glottals of speaking actors, the sinews of enfilade and defilade.

I wish these wrights would be more out of touch — that's how the spark will learn to jump, and in jumping, shed energy all over the place — even enough to start worlds.

Imagination and Identity

(March 2011)

I received an email recently about something called "The American Slavery Project," sponsored by "The New Black Fest," a theatre project arranged around the sesquicentennial of the Civil War.

The purpose of this monthly reading series is to "celebrate the work of African American playwrights who boldly and refreshingly explore slavery and/or the Civil War" and to "promote a new generation of African-American voices who are telling the diverse and rich stories from an era that most adversely affected us."

This appeal to ethnic authenticity really bugs me because, to me, it indicates a distrust, rather than an enlargement, of the power of imagination.

At one point (and it may still mean this in certain quarters), people and artists saw "imagination" as a kind of a passport: through the "travel agency" of the artist, a reader or listener or an audience member could cross over to places and into people that were "other" or "exotic" or simply unknown.

And this imaginative power was available to everyone as a base pair in their genetic inheritance, each of us graced with some degree of its alchemical power simply by being human. With the imagination in gear, any person, with enough research and whimsy, could write about distant lands and behaviors and make them visceral, pungent, rhapsodical, exchangable.

In fact, if such a word as "duty" could be used, it was the artist's duty to employ the imagination in this way, to show virtuosity in translating personal visions into communicable enthusiasms. (As an example, take Patrick O'Brian, author of a series of sea novels. In a paean to the writer in the April 2000 *Harper's*, writer Lewis Lapham states that "he was not the kind of writer who traveled around the world with a pencil and a camera. He relied on his imagination and prodigious research...")

In short, this kind of applied imagination allowed artists to pretend to be people they were not and go to places they could not afford and offer all of this to an audience who could, in their turn, do the same thing.

But with the advent of Freud and the tyranny of the psychological, imagination became consonant with subterranean dream worlds and phantasms of individual psyches and opposed to "reason" or "rationality."

The imagination became a privatized internal redoubt, unknowable by anyone outside and sometime even unknowable by the individual. No longer was "imagination" considered a public power, a communal lingua franca, catholic and democratic.

One political and artistic expression of this change is what I call "script ghettos," extrapolated from "identity politics," which takes its cue from a more generalized and subtle re-segregation of the world called "multiculturalism."

The assumption is that only women can really write about women, African Americans about African Americans, and so on, discounting (in fact, demonizing) any attempt by anyone "outside" to employ imagination as a tool for crossing boundaries because someone from the "outside," by definition, cannot be authentic and, therefore, cannot get it "right."

I am thinking about all of this out loud because I have created projects which, by this order of thinking, I should not have done. One involved writing a play about breast cancer. The other was adapting a book about miscegenation in North Carolina at the turn of the century into a play, *A Question of Color*.

Clearly I am neither a woman with breast cancer or a descendant of an illegal African American/white marriage in the late 19th century. Yet I feel "qualified" to do these projects because of my imagination, that is, because of the power we all have -- with enough research, discussion, self-examination, vision and revision -- to move ourselves into other places, times, and psyches.

In fact, I felt energized by the challenge of these two projects because they were so unlike me. I had to really move outside my usual blind-spotted, culture/gender-bound self as I read memoirs of breast cancer survivors or accounts of sharecroppers in the Piedmont, and in doing so, a lot of fat and fatigue fell away from the creative muscles as they stretched to take in suffering I had not suffered, indignities I had not had to endure.

My imagination enlarged me by feeding deeply, fattening me for the journey into these new worlds. What an absolute and positive joy it was to be plowing new fields and not be confined to the finitude of my own ego.

Some may say that I had no right to do this because I could not possible know, deep in the bedrock bone, what these experiences were, that I could not know the pain of breast cancer unless I have had it, or lived with someone who did.

I would agree with this somewhat: there will always be a zone that the imagination cannot cross because the imagination is all about simile, what something is "like." I can get close with "like," but I can never quite hook the essence, the "isness."

But that "close" has much power, and for the purposes of making art, it is more than enough to authenticate its own motives. The art created out of this proximity is not meant to be finished, the way a sermon or a testament or a screed is finished.

Instead, it is meant to spark in the viewer or listener another expedition, linked but also unchained, with the hope that multiple expeditions will somehow soften our sometimes brutal selfishness and really make our collective existence kinder and gentler.

So, I celebrate the imagination as it traverses wherever it wants to go and reports on whatever it learns in whatever way it wants. Imagination should not be harnessed to making art that validates limitations or an "insider" status.

Every playwright feeling free to write about anything, like or unlike, enlarges the vocabulary for collective understanding; if chained, all we will get are communiques from competing camps or limp bagatelles on a foreshortened "human condition" mostly confined to internal psychological doodlings.

Meanwhile the richness of the whole world continues to blow its clarion of invitation. I, for one, cannot wait to get my passport stamped.

Black Fest, Part II

(April 2011)

In my essay last month, "Imagination and Identity," I discussed an email notice I received about something called "The American Slavery Project," sponsored by "The New Black Fest," a theatre project arranged around the sesquicentennial of the Civil War.

The purpose of this monthly reading series is to "celebrate the work of African American playwrights who boldly and refreshingly explore slavery and/or the Civil War" and to "promote a new generation of African-American voices who are telling the diverse and rich stories from an era that most adversely affected us."

That appeal to ethnic authenticity really bugged me because, to me, it indicated a distrust, rather than an enlargement, of the power of imagination, a notion I tried to explain in the essay.

Well, I went to the first reading on March 7 of *Fast Blood* by Judy Tate, and it turned out to be one of those warm, supportive, earnest events with a talk-back -- a satisfying experience all-around. Except that I left the event still feeling bugged, only this time by something completely different.

The burr under the saddle comes out of the project's mission statement: to celebrate work that "boldly and refreshingly explore[s] slavery and/or the Civil War." Actually, two burrs under the saddle. First, I think this focus is past its prime, and, second, I think it is insufficiently bold.

Past its prime -- yes. The room on March 7 felt suffused with what I can only call a retro aura. The organizers, in their pre-show talk, used "slavery" and the "Civil War" as if the terms had settled meanings that people with good progressive urges could use to both advance the cause of unfinished civil rights and beat back re-castings of the Confederacy as "celebrations of heritage." Together, art and properly told history would contribute what it could to ensure the arrival of justice.

Really? Assuming that one could get the "meaning" of the link between the Civil War and slavery "right," does that knowledge, told "boldly and refreshingly," really have any transformational voltage in the world of the United States in 2011? Like it or not, it's old news. Perhaps a case for its utility can be made as a starting point for an intellectual and historical understanding of the parlous

state of people of color in our culture. But as a guide to plan present actions, it has limited usefulness, no matter how artistically told.

I also feel the festival's mission is insufficiently bold. The slavery the promoters need to focus their artistic sights on is not the version of 150 years ago but the current one of the American prison system, which is as systematically racist and apartheid-like as the older "peculiar institution." Yes, one can trace the sesquicentennial link between the two, but the dismantling of the barbaric and corrosive penal system needs to happen right now, if not earlier, and a festival like this, dedicated to exploring slavery through this generation's voices, should focus on the slavery that matters most to this generation, and that's the one perpetrated through the law books and paid for by our tax dollars.

I applaud, as I always do, any effort by my fellow theaterites to use what powers they can gather to speak to the things that afflict us in ways that help us to understand, resist, advance. I only wish that this particular effort hadn't settled on such a limited discourse. Perhaps in its next go-around, it can blow a brighter trumpet and call us all to a different set of arms.

The Magic of the Magic of Theater

(May 2011)

In what does the "magic" of the magic of theatre consist?

The Marvelous Maria Beatriz asked that question after we had seen a production by Belarus Free Theatre of "Discover Love," about political disappearances of citizens.

The framework for the question was set up a few nights before, when we ushered for Lynn Nottage's new work, *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark*, about black actors in 1930s Hollywood and the choices they did and did not get to make about their careers.

Nottage first.

Vera Stark is a stylish production: motorized sets, sumptuous costumes, well-calibrated acting. In short, not a hair out of place and just the thing to appeal to their subscribers and the gerontological crowd from which they draw their audiences.

The script is, I think, a mess, with a first act pitched at the level of a minstrel show and the second act (set decades later) a parody of academic deconstructionist speechifying by people discussing Vera Stark's meaning to the culture.

Beyond that, however, it was next to impossible to feel connected to anything about what was happening on the stage. So finely tuned were the goings-on that the most one could do was simply watch the passing show -- one was not invited in or spoken to or even necessary to the event.

In other words, while it had all the magical trappings of theatre, it had no magic -- that is, that quality, ineffable and largely serendipitous, that shifts the theatre-goer out of the ordinary into the extra-ordinary, that abolishes all but the present-tense and makes the theatre the entire world and our citizenry in it essential and organic.

Vera Stark tried very hard to provoke this, but we could see its sweat and so became disenchanted.

A few days later, Belarus Free Theatre at LaMama, in the Annex.

A large open space, completely open, with a mattress (four tire rims and a washtub tucked underneath), a chair, and a backdrop for projections. Three

performers. Entrances and exits made from the behind the backdrop, a sound design of voices and effects. And the story of the abduction and murder of Tolya, the husband of Irina Krasovskaya, by the political authorities, told by simple direct address to the audience, their words translated into English supertitles.

And the Marvelous Maria Beatriz and I are in tears at the end.

Why?

Directness, simplicity, honesty — those were there. But also how the performers invested the artifice with themselves and didn't just move around inside it.

How they shaped the air with their words the way a painter reconfigures a canvas with paint.

How well they deployed the paradox at the heart of a theatrical production: the more "realistic" a production tries to be, the less real it comes off; the more the artifice is embraced as artifice, the greater the possibility to connect emotionally and intellectually.

Those are the ingredients of the magic, how they reëlasticize time and space so that veneers crack and honesty seeps in and the daily and the contingent and the instrumental stand in momentary defeat while aesthetic pleasure teams up with moral respect to make each of us feel consequential and thankful.

The secular version of grace.

Antoine's Beef/Luther's Hammer

(June 2011)

Mordecai Gorelik, in his *New Theatres for Old*, tells the story of the founding of André Antoine's Théâtre-Libre on March 30, 1887, and how Antoine prevailed upon his mother to borrow the family's dining-room furniture to furnish one of the plays on that evening's bill. Antoine was passionate, Gorelik points out, to create a naturalistic theatre that would take its cue from Emile Zola's call for a revolution in the arts and counter what he saw as the confected theatre practices of his day. Naturalism, with its greasy and rough devotion to telling the truths of life (in a later production, Antoine even had real beef hanging from the stage-set of a butcher's shop), would, in Zola's words, "bring the theatre into closer relation with…truth and experimental science" where there would no longer be any school, formulas, or standards of any sort but simply "life itself, an immense field where each may study and create as he likes."

I understand completely Antoine's impulse because I have the same urge when I look at the kind of plays being done in so many American theatres, except in this case the urge is to smash the furniture and mince the beef because what Antoine loosed (no blame on him, though) has decayed to such a degree that very little that is natural or real rides the boards today.

Oh, "real" stuff walks around up there, to be sure: endless parades of dysfunctional families and dysfunctional relationships, riffs on bourgeois anxieties as if these constituted some universal life's "essence," "diversity" operatics (queer comings-out, lesbian goings-on, Puerto Rican bi-polarity, hip hop/rap from "da street," etcetera) — the rant could go on, but enough.

It is not even navel-gazing — that at least might pretend to something like an inward look, a go at being ego-less and self-full. No — all this stuff is about "self-reflection," not as pondering and mulling but as a witness to a witnessing, the mirrored gaze, the narcissus feedback loop, the "mirror mirror on the wall" self-tongued monologue (no more one-person shows, please!), the mistaking of the echoes of our own voices for the voices of gods. Unless we see ourselves up there, there is nothing really worth seeing — that is what the "real" has been reduced to.

And really, what else can be expected in a culture that commodifies everything for the purpose of profit and limits "the measure of man" to really puny slices of pretty pathetic (and advertisable-to) desires for happiness and

satisfaction? And which, artistically, is a culture so tyrannized by genre and precedent (and so ill-educated in a broadly liberal way) that "new" simply means "newly recycled" and the unexpected is reduced to cleverly finding ways to tweak worn-out plots?

I do not have a coherent response to what I see and feel, to the disappointments and angers. Right now, all I have are recurring images, repeating impulses. I have been reading lately the prophets in the Old Testament, barking out from the deserts around them. Desert imagery has filtered into my thoughts, and I understand much better what drove (and drives) people to the desert to find something hard and merciless that instructs by indifference, something completely opposite the cottoned-up and nannified Plato's Cave we call modern culture. I have always had a sneaking admiration for the Puritan divines who took on the wilderness of the New World — not their thirst for theocratic authority but their willingness to decry the moral decrepitude around them and drive a hard edge against the evils of the world. I've been working through Melville's writings, that disappointed idealist whose disappointment is rich with anger and thwarted love. In New York, in this ridiculous city, where self-absorption is played as a contact sport, I have been eyeing people and telling them to stop spitting on the sidewalks and throwing their cigarette butts at my feet and to hold open the goddamn door when they go through it and think of somebody else other than their runty-assed self. Apocalypse has been a word sweetening in my mouth lately.

Antoine's beef was meant as a palate cleanser — no, something bigger, not just an aesthetic re-arrangement but a wholesale shriving. Some intimacy with reality had been lost in the French national theatre, some vital love had been betrayed as practices calcified and performances became mannered and manikinned. The same thing has happened today: we have a theatre that diddles itself for the purpose of seating butts and has nothing to say of any importance about anything important. I do not know what today's equivalent of Antoine's beef is, but it needs to reach for what Melville said well in *The Confidence-Man*: what we need in our works of art is "more reality than real life itself can show… nature unfettered, exhilarated, in effect transformed….It is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie."

But it is not just about technique and practices. We need something equivalent to the Reformation catapulted by Martin Luther, some analog to the 95 theses nailed to the door in 1517 — something that shakes the mind awake

and begins to teach it how to smash the mirror, forego its selfishness, carbonate itself with a purpose bigger than comfort or acquisition. Antoine's "beef" with the world needs to be our beef as well — no more narcotizing theatre, no more anodynes masquerading as art, a theatre with something to say about the things that need to be said and not this irrelevant pastiche of worn-out formulas, tics, and gimmicks.

I don't mean to be grim about this — I may admire the Puritan divines, but I certainly wouldn't want to be one, and Jeremiah had not the cozy way about him. If the re-forming is not done with love, then it just becomes vandalism or another form of empty performance art. But make no mistake: it is time, it is always time, when it come to loving true theatre, to feel a bit Lutheran, heft the weight of the hammer in one hand and the paper wad of no-longer-can-be-unvoiced outrages in the other, and start pounding away on the cathedral door.

Copy Rights and Epubs

(July 2011)

I am creating ebooks out of my plays and essays and posting them to my website, and this has made me think a lot about copyright.

I've written before about copyright and the ills it perpetuates. So, when I've put all this energy into creating the e-publications, do I sell them? Or do I give them away?

In fact (this line of thinking led me), in terms of the plays themselves, why not just give my plays away for production? Or, in another way of thinking it, it is more important to me to have my plays produced than it is to make money off them.

Whew! That's a relief, a relieving thought. Really. Not to be guided by love of money or the flatulence of self-importance.

So I have announced on my website that all of my theatrical work — my plays, essays, and what-not — will be offered under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License.

My hero in this is Nina Paley, creator of *Sita Sings The Blues*; she licensed that film under the same license agreement. And what she says about why she did that works for me — and which I borrow for my own declaration:

> From the shared culture my work comes, and so back into the shared culture I send it.
>
> You don't need my permission to copy, share, publish, archive, show, sell, broadcast, or remix any play you want to do. Conventional wisdom urges me to demand payment for every use of the work, but such control offers a false sense of security. The only real security I have is trusting you, trusting culture, and trusting freedom.
>
> That said, I will enforce the Share Alike License. You are not free to copy-restrict ("copyright") or attach Digital Restrictions Management (DRM) to any play or anything derived from it.

There — that feels much better.

Onward.

Principles of Writing Plays

(September 2011)

Over the years I've made a few guidelines for myself in my writing. These are as much aspirational as practical (I am sure that any one of my plays has violations aplenty in its pages), but they've steered me well.

Passover

Each of my plays is an attempt to answer "What makes this night different from all other nights?" If the situation is not different today from what it was yesterday, then there's no opportunity for change (which is what all dramatic narratives should be about).

But it's not just the overall narrative that this applies to. I also apply it to every scene and every line in every scene (including stage directions). Everything in the script should be premised on evolving the mystery at the heart of the Passover question, and that can only happen if the "normal" suddenly isn't.

Give actors interesting stuff to do

The play, the thing on the page, is not, for me at least, only about my "message" -- as Sam Goldwyn allegedly said, "If you want to send a message, use Western Union." It's also about giving actors something interesting to do while on the stage -- to provoke them to move and speak in ways that prompt discovery and trigger surprise. If they're interested in what they're doing, the audience will be interested in what they're doing -- and the gaggle of interested actors becomes my "Western Union."

"What if..."

I dislike it when a dramatic piece announces that it is "based on" or "inspired by" a true story -- too often, that declaration becomes the end-point rather than the starting-point of the endeavor, and all this effort is made to keep faithful to the original, often with a dulling result.

Much better to apply "what if..." to everything in a script in order to generate new possibilities for the dramatic narrative, regardless of fidelity to sources, as well as to unbuckle the narrative strait-jacket that writers get themselves tangled in as they work to "get their message across."

"What if..." is a solvent and provocateur -- use it liberally.

Comedy isn't jokes

I can't write funny lines -- I envy people who can, like Paul Rudnick, whose "Shouts & Murmurs" pieces in the *New Yorker* make me laugh out loud without effort, or David Sedaris in his less self-involved efforts. But comedy in a play doesn't really come from the funny lines -- it rises out of the human situation into which the writer has embedded the characters and from which they struggle to extract meaning. Detailed observation combined with the right amount of irony and skepticism will always evoke humor. Which leads to....

Take it seriously

A play of mine recently done, *The Greed Gene*, has as its premise an absurdly exact rendition of genetic traits that an expectant couple can look forward to in their coming child: "an Eddie Bauer tendency along the sixth chromosome," for example. But the play works only if it is directed to be completely serious in everything that goes on, that the world of the play, absurd to us, is completely natural to the characters. The play is meant to satirize, but the satire will only work if there is no "nudge nudge wink wink" going on. Too many plays that mean to satirize or condemn or sermonize about don't work because the writer wants the audience in on the joke or the condemnation, such as a play I recently saw that had several fundamentalist Christian characters. They were treated shabbily by the playwright because he wanted the audience to laugh with him about their "benighted" condition, but such a point of view breaks faith with the purpose of dramatic writing, which should to explore deeply the notion that nothing human is alien.

Never use "I remember" or monologue or phone conversations

Weak tactics to get across exposition -- dramatically inert, a form of cheating, a species of laziness.

Do the desk time

Every day, I keep my writing appointment, even if it's only to produce crap that I'll delete later. If one doesn't do the desk time, nothing valuable ever gets produced.

That's about it.

Writing Plays in a Time of War

(October 2011)
First published in Scene4, Winter 2001

Maria Beatriz and I have visited the World Trade Center site. The steps we took to get there are not important; suffice it to say that we have seen, first-eye and first-hand, what anger has wrought.

A few years ago, Maria Beatriz and I visited the Boott Cotton Mill in Lowell, MA, where they have re-created a typical floor full of 80 to 100 mechanical looms working at full throttle: deafening, and over time, maddening. Visitors are then taken through a set of professionally done exhibits, interspersed with video-taped interviews with some of the surviving workers still in the area after the shut-down of the mills in the 1930s and 1940s. Listening to the interviews, hearing the crash of the looms, imagining what the lives of people must have been like as they were ground away under the iron need for more and more profit -- one can feel the pain and anger soaked into the heavy wood beams and fraying brick, anger and pain that will never go away.

That is what the WTC site will be like. No matter what is built there to memorialize and commercialize, the ground has been drenched in pain and anger that no restoration will ever erase. It has seeped into the beams buttressing our memories, into the brick that shields our mortal coils.

I know it has already soaked into my framework. I did not lose anyone in the collapse of the buildings. Someone I "knew of" was on one of the flights from Boston to L.A., but not "known of" closely. And while it is possible to empathize with those who lost whom they lost in the disaster, it is almost impossible to sympathize with them: their pain can never be adequately translated, our pain for them at a remove, never cognate. Life goes on.

Yet in my recent work I have noticed a level of anger in the words and actions unlike anything I've drafted before. It is not just anger fed by September 11. It is also anger fed by the stupidities that have followed — in the bombing of Afghanistan, the multiple political hypocrisies, the pointlessness of a war on terrorism by using the means of terrorism. All of that has become in-flight fuel to an angry fire as life continues to hurtle through space and time.

I don't like this feeling at all. It coarsens joy and abrades the flesh. Yet I have been unable to diminish it except by writing it out, letting its power loose

and trying to direct its energy, if not into healing, at least not into more corrosion — to make it cleansing anger, purgative and commiserating.

One play I've recently finished drafting, titled *Poly X*, is based on the story of Polyxena, daughter of Hecuba and Priam of Troy. The story that leads to her death, from "The Iliad," is full of Homer's usual mayhem and discord. Hector, Polyxena's brother, kills Achilles' boy-toy Patroclus; prior to this, Achilles had killed Troilus (brother of Polyxena and Hector) in the temple of Apollo, supposedly sacred space, while Polyxena watched. Achilles kills Hector in revenge for Patroclus and drags his body around behind his chariot for three days.

During all of this Achilles has taken a liking to Polyxena; he proposes to Priam that he marry her, and that he, Achilles, would convince the Greeks to give up their siege. Polyxena sees this as an opportunity to get revenge on Achilles, so she agrees and lures Achilles back to the same temple in order to seal the deal. There, Paris (also Polyxena's brother) kills Achilles by firing an arrow into his vulnerable heel. The trouble doesn't stop with death, though: the ghost of Achilles demands that Polyxena be sacrificed on his grave before he releases the winds that will carry the Greeks home after their victory over Troy. Her throat is slit and the blood poured over Achilles' grave.

The play is about the collateral damage of war — Polyxena is innocent of any responsibility for starting or maintaining the war, yet her death, the last of the conflict, is supposedly justified by a righteous anger grounded in Achilles' petulance and bombast. She is the mirror image of Iphegenia, who was sacrificed by her father to get the Greeks to Troy in the first place (though in some accounts she is saved from that horrible death by the gods — no such salvation for Polyxena). It is a play full of blood and cynicism, of Polyxena's anger as she tries to make the senseless make sense, to make her death mean more than butchery and the auguries of continuing bloodiness. There is nothing redemptive about the end of the play; we will continue to suffer from pathologies induced by pride and smugness and arrogance.

Like Athena, this play came out of my head by its own accord — I have never taken notes for such a play, it has not simmered in my brain for a while, the story of Polyxena had never struck a chord before, etc. Yet the seepage, the infusing of crushed bodies and diluted screams — it has taken up residence, and its voice will not be stilled easily, translated smoothly, folded-in to the homely routines — it will only out in plays like *Poly X*, seeking through expressions of rage and

hopelessness to find some shred of reason why life should be honored at all when such a species as ours stains the land.

I don't profess to understand this rage. I'm not sure I know how to make it not take up all the oxygen in the room. And yet I do not want its energy to simply just "go away" in the name of some vague "healing." I do not want to mend quickly the cracks in soul and mind it has caused because, like a volcano or an earthquake, it has rearranged the land into new topographies of possibilities that, regardless of the barbarism, now need to be charted and announced — exactly what we artists are charged to do.

This is what it means to create plays in the time of war — to allow rage its inks and to be ready to scribble down what it divulges while not allowing everything and everywhere to be over-written by its typographies — to use the art to keep some corner of the soul available to light without denying the "darkness visible" that also pulses there. Both lights shine in us — plays in the time of war need the illumination of both to be honest, and it is honesty above all — not patriotism, not revenge, not the "affairs of state" or the consolidations of power — that will keep us, momentarily — momentarily — secure and healed as human beings.

Zucotti Park or Bust

(November 2011)

I have the blessing/curse of working in a building diagonally across from the New York Federal Reserve and few blocks from Wall Street. Constantly being in the dominion of money, near its cathedrals and Praetorian guards and talismans (i.e., the bull statue), gives me a figurative rash. Here is where destruction (my destruction) was planned; from here corruption flooded the land.

Most lunchtimes, and many after-work times, I head to Zuccotti Park (now named Liberty Plaza, since Liberty Street runs along one side) for a detox and a refreshment from Occupy Wall Street. What has been happening there for almost a month, and what it has prompted throughout the city and the world, is about the only good news in town. It is with gratitude that I help make sandwiches, hand out newspapers, clean up the encampment, hold a sign, stuff $10 into the donation jar. I'm under no illusion that this collective action will topple the Chase building a block away or make the gold 80 feet under the Federal Reserve float to the top where we could sell it and do some good with the proceeds.

But in the end-times of American democracy, it's better to do this on my lunch-hour than wait passively for the tide of shit to turn the 99% to zero.

The punditocracy and chattering classes (a marvelous phrase) whine about the weirdness of the crowd and a lack of a demands-list and the fluid agenda, but of course they miss the point, either willfully/cynically or through their hard-acquired ignorance. The message is three-part, and it is clear: 1) the 99% have been shafted and don't want to be shafted anymore; 2) either we have corporatocracy or democracy, but we can't have both; and the most important 3) it's time that the power structure fears its citizens rather than the other way around.

If there is a single demand, it's this: Come protest with us. Don't worry about having a white paper in your back pocket or a fully coherent critique in the back of your mind. Just put your body out here.

And the "here" doesn't have to be the park. It can be in every email you send your mother, in every conversation with a colleague, in a few dollars in the donation can or some clothes you no longer need handed off. My boss, who describes himself as a conservative but who is very sympathetic to what is going on (and has visited the park), now introduces this question into every

conversation: “So, what do you think about what’s going on?” Just to keep it at a simmer, just to keep the topic in the air.

If this effort can hold on long enough, that’s how it will succeed best — that its concerns will leak into everybody’s every-day life, so that someone who would never think of going to the park will still have the park come to him or her in the guise of a question or a wondering or an image or even a salutary anger.

There is no question that at some point, whether it’s with these people or someone else, “We are the 99%” will have to take on a form, take an institutional risk — but not a form that has failed — hierarchical, compartmentalized, etc. The people there, through the groups they’ve set up, the general assemblies they run twice a day, their effort to equalize all the voices, are looking to build something along mutual aid/anarchist or syndicalist lines, something very much untried and unknown in our country but which has been well spelled-out by Kropotkin, Berkman, and others.

This, as much as any specific prescriptions they come up with, should be supported, because we need something else in this country that has not been commodified and controlled by people who do not have our best interests in mind.

So, if you live in New York, come to the park, just to see for yourselves what there is to see. If you don’t live in New York, send in a monetary donation — many organizations have been set up to collect money. If you agree, in part or in whole, with what “We are the 99%” is trying to get across, there are a lot of Occupy protests going on around the country — join one or start one if there isn’t one happening. (Even in Jersey City, near where I live, one of the more economically depressed cities in New Jersey, someone had set up a table at the farmers’ market with literature and buttons and signs. If it can happen in Jersey City, then…)

The point is, make this protest — its focus, its anger and sadness — seep into ordinary, tint every conversation, shade every action. The end-times are here, but they aren’t finished yet. As Thoreau said in “Civil Disobedience”: “[If the machine of government] requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine.”

Walkabout Thoughts

(December 2011)

The following are transcripts of short talks I recorded on my voice memo function as I went on a walkabout around my neighborhood. The reference to Block and Tackle Productions refers to the new production company that my theater compatriot Elfin Vogel and I have created. (See http://blockandtackleproductions.com)

Part 1

I'm walking down the street and I'm talking to myself. And the thought I'm having is this. First of all, it's not about me as the writer, not about a career as a writer. It is about something else. It's about taking what I write to create value.

That is how it connects to my long-time interest in whatever digital technologies there are for re-creating dramatic narratives. So I'm interested, for instance, in animation, video-taping and video editing, and even bringing back my interest in photography -- the manipulation of images, with voice-over, in an animated sequence -- even a graphic novel animated, with scripts done specifically for the iPad or other tablet devices, where you could have, as a portion of a script that someone is reading, a link that brings up a pop-window with a short video segment of that particular passage.

This notion that everything has to be on the page is not necessarily true, it's actually kind of retro, that somehow the device that interprets what's on the page is the reader, when in fact it should be the writer along the director and actors interpreting it for the reader. And there is no way that things written on the page can necessarily do that, and there is no reason to wait to get into a room with actors and a director for it to happen, there's no reason why it can't happen as the person is reading the script.

Part 2

Back to this notion of the reader of the script as the device that interprets the script. Quaintly retro as it is, I think this is a notion that can be overcome by the use of digital technologies. This notion of interpretation should rest in the hands of the creators -- as well as the audience, to some extent -- but definitely in the hands of the creator.

There is an interesting parallel between these thoughts and the reading I've been doing about open and closed systems, specifically from Jaron Lanier's

book *You Are Not A Gadget*. There are benefits to the open-source software movement. But as he points out, what it gives you is Linux and Open Office, which are not particularly inventive re-creations of Microsoft Office 2003 and the Unix operating system. What you end up getting are re-hashed systems that will satisfy people who don't have a lot of money or who are ideologically opposed to giving Microsoft or Apple anything more but don't necessarily lead to innovative approaches to using software to solve problems.

Whereas a closed system, for all of its authoritarian imperial nature, gives us the iPhone. Open-source software will not give you the iPhone. Steve Jobs may have been a crazy, mad, insane detail-oriented person, but in that way he could insure the quality of his inventions. And there was no need to compromise on quality or jeopardize the performance.

Part 3

I was talking about open and closed systems, and how the closed systems of Google or Apple or Microsoft end up creating not only many bad things but also many things that people find useful in their lives. Open-source systems never do that.

The parallel is this. Giving a script over to a literary manager and expecting that literary manager, with all the cultural, age, gender, etcetera differences between the writer and the literary manager -- to depend upon that device is like open-source software. You may get something that you expect, you may not, but the fact is that you've lost the control that a closed system gives you.

On the other hand, if you can record and then use that recording to "make your case," then you have a closed system and more control over the elements of that system. It's quite understandable why Jobs was the tweaker that he was, to use Malcolm Gladwell's term, because he wanted to get it right, get it his way -- and he got it right quite often.

This is why I'm thinking that rather than move only towards stage production through Block and Tackle Productions -- which is fine in its own way but is also, in a way, retrograde -- move towards efforts to create "interesting innovative dramatic narratives" that people will want to pay attention to. It's not necessarily having bodies in the seats that makes it a live performance. "Liveness" comes out of something else, and that "liveness" can be individualized on a mobile phone or collectivized in a theatre -- but it's not inherent in bodies in a darkened

space watching what's happening on a stage. I think that's an older useful form but not the only form.

Part 4

Back to this notion of closed systems and quality control. I also think that it gets to the, perhaps, post-modern notion that there is nothing but interpretation, that there is no ur-text to which everything else can be referred and measured by. If that's the case, and I think it is, given our battered sensory apparatus and a tricky, buggy system of rationality and argumentation, then interpretation is all there is. So, why leave the interpretation up to the reader, to the literary manager or artistic director completely? Not that you have to usurp it all, but on the other hand, there's no reason why they have to have the field to themselves.

The question then becomes, how to deliver this package? Many theatres still want hard copy -- that means running it off, binding it, sending it in so that they physically read it. Some theatres are using PDFs on Kindles or iPads or tablets (which would be much better, because on a tablet device, you could embed links for video or audio, which you can't have on a Kindle) -- when you email a script in, you could make it a PDF interactive, in which you can insert these links into it, or create it specifically for a tablet for digital output.

But if they want hard copy, how does that get solved?

Part 5

If you have to send in a hard copy, then you can send in either a flash drive (gets expensive) or a disk, labeled with instructions on how to use it -- make it as part of the script itself. It's a little more cumbersome, but they would be able to see it and (hopefully) use it.

But it doesn't matter what the delivery device is. The thought behind it is this: the interpretive device for the script has to be the people creating and sending out the script, not the reader. Of course the reader will experience the script however he or she experiences it, but the quality, type, and range of the experience has to be in the hands of the people who create the script. Otherwise, you will always always always depend upon the kindness of strangers to get it the way you want to get it. And they won't -- they simply won't. They have their own needs, their own way of looking at things. And that's the way it is.

Part 6

What to do next? Training, software, hardware, colleagues with whom to work — and money. Always money.

2010

An Embarrrassing Surprise?

(January 2010)

"I'm shocked, shocked to find that schooling is going on in here!" (with apologies to Claude Rains, Julius Epstein and Casablanca)

I work for an educational not-for-profit in New York City. We have contracts with the city's public schools for classroom work and professional development and run an NSF-funded after-school science education program in ten community centers of the New York City Housing Authority. In our internal discussions about our students, we often do the rueful review of their educational deficits, at times sounding not all that different from Mark Slouka in his essay, "Dehumanized," the *Harper's Magazine* article that our editor asked to use as our source material for this month's issue.

But when I first read his piece in September 2009, then re-read it for this essay, I found myself then and now irritated by his special pleading for the humanities and his speculative assertions about their supposed salutary effect on human behavior. I was also irritated by his posture of shock that a state-funded school system, fueled by money granted to it through a capitalist economic system, would dare do the bidding of that system by creating workers knowledgeable in those things that will benefit that system. Surely none of what he rails against should be a surprise to him, and posing as if it is a surprise is embarrassing to watch.

He does not make a new or fresh complaint (read Bowles and Gintis' *Schooling in Capitalist America*, published in 1976) -- and I would argue that American schools have done such a mixed job in educating their students because they have been trying to serve split masters (as they have done since the days of Horace Mann) — the spear-side of the economic system and the distaff-side of Mr. Slouka's sentimental notion that education should ennoble, soften, and expand in order to create thoughtful and active democratic citizens. Maybe what schools should do is simply jump whole hog into STEM [science, technology, engineering, and math] education, just as President Obama recently called for, and not worry about whether they have equipped their students with deeper knowledges or more democratic souls (though there is nothing in the study of STEM that would prevent such soul-delvings). Especially when, like some students we work with, they can't, at the age of twelve or thirteen, use a

ruler properly or make change and don't have the least understanding of any mechanical or biological system important to their survival.

In short, perhaps schools should just frankly acknowledge that, yes, their role in the culture is to create people who fit into the system in its historical time and place and fit into it in this way: imaginative enough to create the things that will advance both corporate profit and social goodness (usually in that order) but not so imaginative that they pose a legitimate threat to the system (faux-threats, such as those posed by artists of all stripes, are acceptable, especially since they can be so easily co-opted and exploited). It's foolish to think our educational system, at any level, has a mission to create people who then will resist and rebuke the economic and political masters that feed that system. Why would a state, even one nominally democratic, like our own, fund its own dismantlement?

Perhaps such an acknowledgement of their indoctrinal purpose would help schools educate students better because it might get them to realize that students need many more skills and tactics than the system currently offers them, focused as it is on ersatz divisions of knowledge into "subject matter" and excluding from that "matter" such really helpful things like plumbing, carpentry, car mechanics, understanding a lease or contract, learning how to navigate the hallways of government, and so on. I would argue that kids spend too much time in school, at least "school" as it's structured now. It would be great if they could spend a portion of each day outside of Smart Boards and curricular strait-jackets learning how to wash a load of clothes, kill a chicken, fix a flat tire, unplug a toilet, write a decent thank-you note, sew a seam, cook a simple meal for four, and so on.

In fact, it would not be too far-fetched to say that our educational system unprepares students, not through incompetence (or only) but because it insufficiently focuses on the important things in life -- that is, "important" because they actually contribute to the survival of the individual on a daily basis and contribute to that individual's sense of mastery over this thing called "life." Students currently feel mastery over nothing because they are hardly ever required to master something that can anchor them in the actual world.

These constraints may be obnoxious to those with Mr. Slouka's inclinings, but, as usual, liberations can be found within the constraints, even if they can't become matters of policy. Individual teachers working with individual students can do what they can do to promote questioning authority, analysis of lies and truth, and so on in the ways that Mr. Slouka would cherish -- the quiet

subversiveness so enamored of aesthetes, that fuels art-making and feeds memoirs and poetry (but withers under the joust of politics).

(A connected aside: Another thing I found irritating in this essay was Mr. Slouka's unvoiced class and tribal bias -- that the "right" education is liberal(ish) in nature -- that an education that might teach someone to be conservative, to honor the authority of tradition and the tradition of authority, to be a patriot (even if one is critical of the patria), to be content with being content, and so on would not be a proper education in the sense that he used the word.)

But I would suggest something even more vigorous he could do with his indignant heat than write one-off articles for a national magazine. Just as it might be liberating for the school system to state, "Yes, we are, indeed, the educational adjunct of the capitalist system and will do our best to see that our students are equipped to succeed in that system," it might be just as liberating for Mr. Slouka to state, "Well, okay, since I can't force the system to make humans humane in the way I think they should be humane, then I will strive to create organizations and associations that will accomplish this goal."

This work would be well within the democratic tradition he claims to honor. De Toqueville, during his early-19th-century walkabout in the United States, found the blizzard of voluntary associations astounding and thought that they provided the proper incubator for (and protector of) democratic behavior, situated as they were between a state interested primarily in maintaining its own prerogatives and the weakness of individuals acting in isolation from one another.

The Christianists and conservatives understand this principle completely, which is why they have spent years building up their local and regional associations in order to apply pressure against the levers of the state and the culture when pressure is needed. Ethnic groups have always done this, as have workers and countless others. So why shouldn't avowed humanists like Mr. Slouka do the same rather than depend upon a state system to do their heavy lifiting? It may not be as sexy as outrage, but it will have longer legs when it comes to running the race.

I share his frustrations but, in the end, can't take them that seriously -- after all, when existed this Golden Age from whose grace we have fallen? Answer: Never. Rather than slipping him into dreamtime and nostalgia, his frustrations should spur him to step outside his writerly cocoon, accept the fact that, of course, we need more math and science education since poetry can't engineer

a worthwhile bridge, and build his shadow humanist-education associations in concert with like-minded others.

An Addendum

In the organization for which I work, the Salvadori Center, we use the built environment as the entry-point into helping teachers teach whatever subject(s) they're teaching. As we say in the office, we state outwardly that we promote STEM education, but inwardly we call it STEAM, adding "arts" as a way to leaven and expand the insights that STEM education give teachers and students about the way the built environment works.

We do this not because "arts" is like some secret ingredient that adds irresistible flavor to some flavorless mash but because our founder, Dr. Mario Salvadori, did not draw strict lines between science, math, and the humanities because he felt each was a reflection of the other, that science had beauty embedded in it, and that aesthetic understanding was most durable when grounded in the materialistic measurings of a mathematical formula.

The problem is not teaching more math and science, or simmering the curriculum down to "mathandscience," as Mr. Slouka lamented, but recognizing the humanities factors marbled throughout math and science -- that math was once considered a religious language, that science grew out of efforts to explain the ways of God to man, and ensure that these roots do not wither or get disappeared. Or, as Mario once said, every structure holds history, math, science, and so on -- one just needs ways to extract it, compile it, link it, forward it.

Instead of being the defense counsel for the humanities (which begins to sound like Oliver asking for more gruel), Mr. Slouka should instead argue to expand the definition of what is "useful" to a capitalist society, that it can generate more and better profit if its workers at all levels have greater curiosity, better literacy, and a more agile intellect as well as a kit-bag of utilitarian skills that will allow them to make their way through the capitalist gauntlet.

Some of us may not like the capitalist system and work in our ways to amend it or bleed it dry, but it is still the only game in town and will be for a long time, and we might as well ensure that those souls for whom we take on the responsibility to educate know how to play this game as expertly as possible -- not as drones but as beings with intellects as full-fledged as possible, stuffed to the gills with as much science, math, and humanities as they can carry.

Sita Sings the Copyright

(February 2010)

Several years ago I wrote a Scene4 essay titled "Dear Mr. Beckett," concerning the copyright restrictions imposed by the Beckett estate on productions of the dead Mr. Beckett's plays. The essay took aim at what I consider the protection racket that copyright has turned into, which serves, as I believe, "the exact opposite of [copyright's] original purpose. Copyright law now is about figuring out how to keep knowledge out of the public domain and milking it for cash-back for as long as possible."

Yes, I understand the opposing arguments about the need to protect an always fragile ability for artists to obtain recognition for and a living from their efforts, and I don't dispute their analysis. I just don't like the arguments and don't like living under their regimen. I believe there are others ways to do this "making a living" thing, and I'm in support of those trying to build that path.

Such as Nina Paley, the creative team behind the animated S*ita Sing*s *The Blue*s, now making its limited run in theatres. (And I mean a single person "creative team": Paley pretty much did all the work on the film, aside from the voiceovers and music and other technical matters.)

I saw *Sita* at the IFC in New York -- but you don't even have to go to a movie theatre to see this because you can watch it, for free, on her website, www.sitasingstheblues.com. Yes, for free. Here's why (from the home page):

> I hereby give Sita Sings the Blues to you. Like all culture, it belongs to you already, but I am making it explicit with a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License. Please distribute, copy, share, archive, and show Sita Sings the Blues. From the shared culture it came, and back into the shared culture it goes.
>
> You don't need my permission to copy, share, publish, archive, show, sell, broadcast, or remix *Sita Sings the Blues*. Conventional wisdom urges me to demand payment for every use of the film, but then how would people without money get to see it? How widely would the film be disseminated if it were limited by permission and fees? Control offers a false sense of security. The only real security I have is trusting you, trusting culture, and trusting freedom.
>
> That said, my colleagues and I will enforce the Share Alike License. You are not free to copy-restrict ("copyright") or attach Digital Restrictions Management (DRM) to Sita Sings the Blues or its derivative works.

And now for the "money shot," so to speak:

> There is the question of how I'll get money from all this. My personal experience confirms audiences are generous and want to support artists. Surely there's a way for this to happen without centrally controlling every transaction. The old business model of coercion and extortion is failing. New models are emerging, and I'm happy to be part of that. But we're still making this up as we go along. You are free to make money with the free content of Sita Sings the Blues, and you are free to share money with me. People have been making money in Free Software for years; it's time for Free Culture to follow. I look forward to your innovations.

And she says this in the section on showing the film: "People often ask 'Are TV rights available?', 'Are theatrical rights available?', etc. The answer is yes, yes, and yes. You already have those rights. *Sita Sings the Blues* uses a yes-based distribution model. It is not part of the permission culture, it is part of the yes culture. So if you'd like hold a screening, don't ask first — just do it. (And see here for how to add it to this page). See the license page for more information about *Sita Sings the Blues*' permissive licensing."

She offers more detail on the site about how money might be made and shared through screenings, distribution agreements, film festivals, PBS showings, and the use of different formats (35mm, HD, DVD) for different screening situations. (The Marvelous Maria-Beatriz and I watched the movie through her computer, which we could have hooked up to our projector if we had wanted it in a larger format.)

I like this whole approach very much, this "yes-based distribution model." I don't know if it's viable. It may be crazy (and crazy-making) to buck the economic tide like this.

But it's equally clear, as the music industry found out, and the book industry is now discovering with the onslaught of e-readers needing e-books for reading, and as newspapers are seeing as that industry spirals into extinction, that what Paley called "the old business model of coercion and extortion" does not map well with a burgeoning web-based world.

Like it or not, every cultural institution has to find a way to re-invent itself in the light of digitization and social media, and there are precious few guideposts for how to do that. As Paley says, "we're still making this up as we go along." And for a playwright like myself, who will never make a living from my craft, what do I have to lose by making my work available to anyone who wants to use it? The

"getting done" is just as important as the "getting paid," and the latter should not stand in the way of the former.

As Annette Hanshaw, the singer featured in *Sita*, says at the end of each of her songs: "That's all."

Why Conservatives Should Fear the Market

(March 2010)

Even in the midst of the rubble of today's recession, those who call themselves conservatives have a touching faith in the magic of the market to bring a new Eden to our troubled land. They still believe that applying the market to the ills that afflict us will increase our choices, improve individual liberty, and reduce the role of government in our daily lives — a pretty concise summation of the primum mobile of the conservative creed.

But what, exactly, does a market do? Adam Smith, one of conservatism's patriarchs, described how the "invisible hand" of the market turns thousands of seemingly unconnected individual economic decisions into a system that, over time, balances supply and demand through the mechanism of price. Smith described a kind of ecology, where largely unseen forces, working in subterranean ways, provide people with information so that they can, in the language of the economists, "maximize their utilities."

Wrenching the feudal command economy into the dynamic capitalist market economy did exactly what Smith said it would do: it created the vast "wealth of nations." However, Smith also saw something that darkened his enthusiasm: markets are vicious places. Instead of the rich matrix of social and religious obligations that marked feudal society and, to some extent, provided a cushion against the exercise of raw power, markets reduced everything to what Marx called "the cash nexus": nothing had value unless it had a price, including people. Competition became the reigning metaphor, meaning that the market needed the blood sacrifice of losers to feed its winners, and profit became the only test for usefulness. Smith was not pleased with this situation, but he felt it could not be opposed without interfering with the efficiency of the market to allocate goods and labor.

If the nature and logic of markets, then, reduces everything to a price and makes people fight tooth and nail to survive, why would conservatives, who express deep affection for loving families and intact communities and traditional values like hard work, ever give their allegiance to such a system? It defeats the very values they profess to love. Instead of embracing markets, conservatives should work to mitigate them at every possible turn so that the acidic power of money does not eventually corrode everything they hold dear.

That they don't puzzles me. Take families, for instance. Conservatives may believe that the dissolution of modern families comes from the wicked fruit grown in the 1960s or the erosive power of the Internet or an increasingly "socialist"(!) government or some other source of moral corruption, but very few of them really see how their beloved markets have fractured the family. As many economists have pointed out over the years, family incomes fell drastically after 1973, especially among the bottom half of the society. This forced women into the job market and increased income instability for everyone except for those on the very top of the pyramid. And the purchasing power of these incomes has never recovered, even three decades later.

Now we find that the majority of poor people are not the young, the old, or the infirm but prime, working-age adults. A breakdown in family values did not cause this poverty; the main cause has been falling wages and diminished employment opportunities, direct effects of the market maximizing its own utilities without regard for human consequences. This should appall and galvanize conservatives. Yet so mesmerized are they by their belief in markets that many of them oppose any measures which would go some distance to softening the economic pummeling families suffer (such as increasing the minimum wage and the earned income tax credit). Their love for markets destroys the families they say they want to preserve.

Or take the notion of community. Many conservatives rue the loss of a sense of community in America, mourn the passing of that complex net of obligations and commitments that, in their tale, characterized American life before the 1960s and made a brief comeback with Ronald Reagan. Yet any serpents in the garden that conservatives conjure pale in effect beside the power of the market, which has demolished entire cities and regions, scattered people to the four winds, and fed the very self-absorption in personal success that destroys any sense of a common purpose. If conservatives really wanted to help Americans preserve their communities, they would rein in the market. But their dogma won't let them think that clearly.

Conservatives should fear the power of the market, not venerate it. The market is an acid that eats away any restraint on its effort to transmute every aspect of human life into exchange value. The things that most of us hold dear — loving families, safe communities, worthwhile labor, attentive schools — are, in the logic of the market, "restraints upon trade" and therefore not worth more than grist, and over the years we have seen them all ground mercilessly

fine. If conservatives really wish to conserve, to neutralize the acid and not put everything between the grindstones, then they need to examine their allegiance to the market. As a first step, they should pledge never to apply market logic to public communal endeavors, such as schools or health care, where the literal lives of people are at stake. As this small inoculation takes effect, they can then move on to the larger realms of capitalism, building in those restraints upon power that will turn our gilded age into a golden age.

Conservatives as conservators — would that such a thing were true.

Rage, Rage...

(April 2010)

My friend's letters had mentioned the possibility as far back as the fall of last year, but now what had stood merely possible had become painfully probable now: the death of his father. He had come back to Brooklyn from San Francisco each time the alarum had rung: the complaints about vague pains and exhaustions, the initial physical exams, the test bore of a biopsy, the sentence of liver cancer, the metastasizing of the cancer to the brain, the long vigil at home, the final breaths. Because of the way nature had built my friend, I knew this whole event was wrenching for him, so I called as often as I could to see how he fared and offer what ear I could for his thoughts and feelings.

As we talked, however, it became quite clear that his father, enfeebled as he was, did not intend to follow the tragic script laid out for him by the expectations of those gathered around him: a graceful acceptance of the inevitable, a slow but metered decline into death, with his family encircling him. Even though he knew that the disease had no intention of breaking camp and going home, he refused to let the siege have its say. He lingered, tenaciously, not with a grim countenance, beads of sweat on the forehead, but with good spirits, a little scorn, and his trademark stubbornness. (It also helped that he didn't have to take pain killers: the tumor in the brain seemed to clamp off the pain, and so he could, unmorphined, keep his full wits about him.) Why should he follow out the tragedy to its appointed curtain-fall? What did he have to lose?

The phone calls got funnier and funnier as both he and his sister, in alternating conversations, would mock-groan about how the long the man hung on to life while the rest of them, lives on hold, waited for him to let go. His sister said she'd forgotten what her husband and children looked like, she'd vigiled at the bedside for so long. And my friend, a clinical psychologist, phoned, e-mailed, faxed, and phoned again to keep his practice going and the grant proposals on schedule. He said that they'd even started to joke with him about it, sitting in the bedroom, drinks in hand, asking him if he could please tell them, with a little more precision, when he intended to let them all get back to their land of the living. And he took it good-naturedly because, as my friend said, he was doing precisely what Dylan Thomas had told him to do: "Do not go gentle into that good night. / Rage, rage..." Well, perhaps not rage, but instead affection: why break a long life-habit that had brought, along with its share of misery and confusion,

such a fine cargo of happiness and zest? It doesn't make sense to break up such a good match.

Of course, the sharp sense of overdue had its downside as well. My friend had learned how grieving requires its proper time and measure; interruptions in that process, for whatever reason, formed many of the reasons why his clients came to talk with him. His father's dogged fight, his blithe "No" in the face of the fated, had strewn sharp stones in the path of his family's grieving, making them wince and dodge and curse. Rather than allowing them to float through a caressing fog of feeling and land in a clearing laved with light, his resolve to stick it out to the end deprived them of that calm exhaustion of a strong emotion playing out its rhythm completely. Instead of a long ride in a limousine, they had a driver who didn't know how to use a clutch.

Which all goes to show, as my friend pointed out, that life never leaves off kidding you. Something as tragic and inevitable as the death of a parent comes along, definitely a one-time deal in life, and you bring out all the cultural, emotional, and familial scripts you own to cope with it.You lay out your suit, shine your shoes, and prepare your dirges. And then life blindsides you with a man who refuses to fulfill the chapter and verse: the suit gets stained, the dirges are off-key, and your heart falters between fiasco and love. You adapt, you cope, you grouse and steam, and in the process you create the "Do you remember when"'s that will keep the memory of the man refreshed. There is no reason why the dying should be any cleaner or more precise than the messy, ad hoc, semi-understood living that proceeded it. Kübler-Ross may have her stages, but nothing ever proceeds that smoothly, or should. One needs the nicks and scrapes for healing to take place.

The last time I spoke with him, when he called to let me know his father had finally passed away, he said everyone was on his or her second drink and that they were reviewing the funeral logistics. Upstairs, the body waited for its preparation. Downstairs, the living lived. It doesn't get much simpler or opaque than that. Life goes on until it ends; as Lily Tomlin's Edith Ann would say, with her lovable lisp, "And that's the truth."

Through all of this, I thought, of course, of my own parents, who are still alive and feeling pertinent, and of the Marvelous Maria Beatriz, whose father died almost four years ago and against whom, every once in a while, washes a spring tide of grief, seemingly from out of nowhere. Happiness and peace may preserve the human race against its darker tendencies, but it is grieving that gives us the

edge that cuts through cant and veneer to help reach an accord with our own mortality. We may grieve with a dour face or with a fine scotch in our hands, but grieving is, in great measure, what makes us human and gives us whatever we can pass off as wisdom.

Outrageous Fortune

(May 2010)

I have been making my way through *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play*. On April 15, Tax Day, I received notice that my play, *Ain't Ethiopia*, a semi-finalist at the O'Neill, would not become a finalist. The two are not unrelated.

Outrageous Fortune might well be subtitled "anyone who wants to become a playwright should have his or her head examined." Throughout its compiled commentary from playwrights, literary managers, artistic directors, and others runs a long thread of complaint, primarily from the playwrights, about how one can have a life in the theatre but not make a real living. Some of the complaint is legitimate, such as with theatres' obsession about producing only premieres and reluctance, if not outright refusal, to do a second production of a work produced somewhere else. Some is just plain whining about the struggles of writing plays and getting them produced. After all, no one asked us to become playwrights, and no one owes us anything for having made the choice.

Things could be bettered, of course. One suggestion I would have, if anyone asked me for one, would be to have pitch sessions with artistic directors, as screenwriters can do with production companies at writing expos in Los Angeles. Gather a hundred artistic directors into a hotel ballroom and let playwrights buy 5-minute sessions at, say, $10 a pop, each session at a particular appointed time, and give the playwrights a chance to pitch scripts directly rather than through the serpentine process of sending in 10 pages and waiting six months for the inevitable "no."

One advantage of pitch sessions like this is that they undermine a self-congratulation in theatre that we're in theatre because of the art of it all. When a screenwriter sits down with a producer, the unspoken, and sometimes spoken, agenda is, "What can we do to make us some money?", "money" being both literal lucre and the proxy for doing what we can do to keep ourselves doing what we love to do rather than stock shelves at Walmart.

Playwrights have the same expectation when they send scripts out to theatres: do my work so that I can continue to have a reason to do my work, and money is a part of the reward for that effort. The economics of theatre are so screwed-around that, as *Outrageous Fortune* points out, money for playwrights will never appear in quantities large enough to sustain them, but that doesn't

negate the fact that the writers want something more substantial as payback than recognition and another entry on the résumé.

But playwrights are not going to get this, ever (though some anointed individual playwrights, the Sarah Ruhls of the world, or those who can forge relationships with theatres might make it). This is due to several factors: too many plays and playwrights chasing too few theatres; theatre (except for musical theatre) as a minor entertainment choice on the modern media menu; shrinking (and aging) audiences; ticket prices; the irrelevance of theatre's voice in modern political and cultural debate.

And perhaps the most important element: despite the respect that theatre professionals pay to the text and the writer, the real king of this realm is the theatre — or, more loosely, the money-guys that produce the work and keep the doors open and the seats filled. Playwrights are the independent contractors brought in to make that happen — and dispensed with when services are no longer needed. (Again, there are always exceptions, but they don't much change the overall picture.)

And if that's the case, then the place for playwrights to go to make the money they say they want is television and movies because there, the money-guys will pay for narrative (especially once small screens — phones, iPads, etc. — become primary venues for viewing). By contrast, theatre is guild-ish, with our Oliver-playwrights asking for more gruel from the institution-keepers and being pissed off when they do and don't get what they ask for.

These thoughts, in an indeterminate quantum state as I read through the book, had their wave collapse when I received the verdict about *Ain't Ethiopia*. Disappointed at first, of course — I have been rejected many times from the O'Neill, and the acceptance of *Ain't Ethiopia* as a semi-finalist (I think one of my best scripts) felt like a sign that I had arrived as a playwright, that I was now going to have a chance to get out of the minor leagues. Then a pang of self-doubt: if *Ain't Ethiopia*, my best work, can't get me past the palace gates, then what is the point? (Ah, that piquant aroma of self-pity!) Then the collapse of the wave function: why have I let myself get myself into a situation where I bring my work on bended knee to certain royalty and expect dispensation to happen? Where is the dignity in that?

The singlemost sharpest point that kept jabbing me intellectually as I read through the surreal scenarios parlayed in *Outrageous Fortune* was this built-in subservience for the playwright. Of course I should feel disappointed at the

O'Neill's decision — a natural human response to loss. But as the inevitable self-doubt crept in, I also began to feel a parallel anger at the in-creeping self-doubt, which signaled to me another wave collapse — why am I not doing for myself what I have been asking others to do for me? Have I built a body of work only to have it deliquesce because I can't convince the guild masters to present it? If production is the point of writing a play, then it makes no sense to depend upon the kindness of strangers to give the play life — the kindness of the playwright should be doing that work.

What, exactly, does that mean?

I suppose self-producing and self-publishing — self-promotion to the max.

Is that what I want to do?

I don't know. It sounds exhausting.

What is the alternative? Take another decade to work on becoming the overnight sensation? Isn't that equally exhausting?

So I suppose it is self-production — at least that has the virtue of being under my control. Though, to be honest, I don't know if I have any talent for it since, as my work-life shows, I have no bent for making decisions that make me money, and money will be needed to make the self-production work.

And for what purpose all this self-production? Garner critical opinion? Simply to do it so that on my death-bed I can say I had done it and not given in, given up? Or do it just for the love of doing it?

Obviously, there are many indeterminate quantum states still in flux.

Yet something has shifted, even if I can't yet measure the tectonics of it, and it's clear that what "is" cannot remain the "is."

Let the waves begin to collapse.

Slings and Arrows

(June 2010)

Last month, Barry Drogin (whom I don't know) responded with thoughtfulness and provocation to my essay "Outrageous Fortune," based on TDF's new book about the life and times of the new play in American theatres.

His thoughtfulness is evident in how he lays out how cultural changes have prodded the theatre arts to make their art in collaborative ways in order to continue having a voice in the social and aesthetic chorus. Gone, according to Mr. Drogin, is the old model of individual artist submitting work to an individual producer to get an individual production. (And I can hear "good riddance" in his tone.)

Now, here is the provoking part:

> ...I am amazed that you, this late in the game, would still seek that brass ring of "legitimate theater" validation. So, the point is not so much to self-produce, as to collaborate with others, to form a company in which the hat of "playwright" is not so explicitly defined. If you give up that dream and that ego, you may get more chances to play in the theatre, and see your plays become reality.

Here, Mr. Drogin, I must admit to being mastered by ambition. I do want that "'legitimate theater' validation," that "brass ring" (of all sizes, from the O'Neill to the Pulitzer). I want my name on the title page of the script, I want an ego satisfied by recognition and accomplishment. I admit to having these foibles, and I admit to failing to move myself spiritually (because it is, in part, a spiritual matter) to a place where I accept the insufficiency of egotism and grandeur and participate in life as porously and unboundaried as possible.

Why do I want all this? And my only answer is "Why not?" I am aware of all the arguments about how acidic ambition can undermine the joys of a life lived in the present-tense, a life underlined by a gentle resignation that things will be what they will be and we should grab the momentary (momentous?) pleasures that the moment offers. And part of me longs for such a release from the slings and arrows of push and shove and grasp and struggle -- it is the closest thing to redemption for the non-religious that our culture offers, this exemption from striving and its resultant strife.

And yet.

Another part of me hears this counsel of acceptance as weak-willed, as insufficient dedication to the desire to achieve, to make a mark on the world, to leave behind something more than just a gentle impress. Yes, I can hear the despotic potential in those words, but I also hear purpose and focus and a goal that gives shape and weight to my life. Not necessarily a pleasant shape or a comfortable weight -- after all, we are talking here about slings and arrows -- but authentic and desired nonetheless.

Ego and pride — I can hear the Greek chorus getting itself up to speed.

But Mr. Drogin is also right that it is "late in the game," which calls for a balancing measure of self-deprecation, not only to keep the hubris at bay but also to blunt the sting of the failures and open up the possibilities of other forms of producing art that don't depend upon either the kindness of strangers or the snake-eating-its-tail grind of self-producing. I have been getting better at laughing at my pretensions -- another if smaller act of redemption and leavening.

So the road forks, Mr. Drogin, yet again — thanks for the signpost.

English Only?

(July 2010)

Les Marcott's linguistic meditations last month, "Manipulating The Language," triggered thoughts I've had over time about the urge, as part of the backlash against immigration in this country, to make English the "official language" of the United States. Here are some thoughts on the matter.

If I had my way I would draft legislation stating that Americans should learn at least, say, three new languages during their lives, especially non-Western languages, such as Chinese and Navaho. I would do this not simply for the cultural diversity it would bring but also because of the very nature of language itself: knowing only a single language restricts us to a very narrow view of the world because, in a real sense, we can only know what that language allows us to know.

A couple of generations ago two linguists, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, theorized that language determined a people's culture, not the other way around. To them, people used language to divvy up the world into what the speakers of the language would then call "reality." Another way of saying this is that we can only know what we have words for, and that what we call "culture" or "reality" is a highly filtered version of the world. It is not the truth, only one possibility among many truths.

Thus English, because of how it's structured, in a sense "allows" only a certain kind of reality. For instance, because we must always have nouns activate verbs, we usually see things in terms of cause-and-effect (which is why science is so popular with Western culture). The Navaho and Hopi languages, however, are much more holistic, seeing the world as one large "verb" which is continually happening (which is why quantum physics would be better expressed in Hopi rather than English).

The upshot of all this is that the more languages we know fluently, the more we have available to us different ways of seeing the world. The more ways we see the world the less prone we might be to wanting to ravage it, or restrict it to certain select groups. Orwell, as usual, had seen this already. The purpose of Newspeak, the language he created for *1984*, was "to make all other modes of thought impossible." With "official" English we will only be able to have "official" thoughts - that is not what liberty, and supposedly what the United States, is all about.

But this doesn't answer the political question in play here: Why *shouldn't* English be the official language? Let's answer that with another question: what does it really mean to make a language "official"? Does anyone really know?

One test of an idea's coherence is to imagine what will happen when people act the idea out. If English were the country's official language, what would be some of the consequences? Perhaps a better way of stating this is, What would be permitted and not permitted? Would there be laws, for instance, banning signs in any language other than English? (Would St. Mary's Bank in Manchester,NH, the country's oldest credit union, have to take down its French nameplate?) Would ethnic organizations be allowed? If they were, could they conduct their business in the language of their choice? How would the teaching of foreign languages in school be affected? Foreign language publications? These questions can be multiplied almost infinitely.

The issue of permission also raises issues about monitoring. France and Spain have academies which aim to keep their language pure. Would we have one, too, the APE (Academy for the Preservation of English), with possibly a "Language Police" having the power to give people "poetic licenses"? What, then, would be the penalties for not using English? In short, in what ways would people's constitutional rights be abridged by making English the official language? (For instance, would it be right to disenfranchise thousands of Hispanic voters who are also American citizens because ballots and voting instructions would not be printed in Spanish?)

But perhaps the question most difficult to answer is, Which English are we talking about? People who propose that English be made official presume that English can also be made standard. But people are not united on what constitutes a "standard" English. An amazing mix of Englishes abound in our country, and what emanates from Washington and New York is only one, and usually the blandest, of many dialects. And language changes constantly; the "standard" English of today won't necessarily be the "standard" English tomorrow. Proponents of an official English have no clear idea of what language they want to enshrine.

The real question here should be what makes for literacy, not what makes for Americanness; action should be for education, not for the nativist conceit of an official language. What we need is more compassionate concern for the quality of life of all people in this country, not more lines which separate and deny; fewer references to bootstraps and more to collective successes.

When Does Someone Get Old?

(August 2010)

My good friend is struggling with a problem most children eventually have to face: what to do when one's parents can no longer take care of themselves. Miriam and Robert (not their real names) are nearly 90. She's suffering from arthritic legs and cannot get around on her own; he's recuperating from hip replacement surgery. After much painful deliberation, the friend, with the support of the family, has decided to place Miriam in a local nursing home. Robert will undergo a month of rehabilitation at another facility; his post-rehab fate is still undecided. For the first time in a long time their house, which they've shared for over 60 years, will stand empty.

Given the hurdles and hoops my friend had to leap over and through, this could easily turn into a story about the fragmented state of health care in America. The family ran themselves ragged trying to juggle finding a suitable home, hiring affordable temporary in-house nursing care, and wrangling with government and hospital officials over paperwork, eligibility, available programs, and so on. If ever there was a need for Virgil to guide Dante through the wilderness, it was this.

It could be that story — but it isn't. Outside the official struggle, late in the evening as the family sat around the kitchen table taking a momentary rest, they could allow themselves to feel and discuss the sadness unfolding around them: two lovely people, who have lived full and honest lives, are approaching what we know we all must approach, what Hamlet called "the undiscover'd country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns." It is no longer impossible to think of their absence.

The sadness doubles in this case because the roles have been reversed: the child now becomes a parent to the parents, doing for them what they had always done for her. She must become patient as they become petulant, supply the memory they are losing, bear their anger as their bodies decline into a rickety infancy. The once-authoritative faces of her parents now carry the look of startled children.

And all this angst must be worked through while the daily necessities — cleaning up, cajoling, laundry, the special diet, setting the appointments -- make their unending demands. In the middle of the grind it becomes difficult to remember that all this effort is the right and proper thing to do. There is no

noble gesture here, no saving the whales in far-off seas, nothing that brings a calm glow of satisfactory finish; instead, it is Depends and crankiness and stubborn dignity and rubber sheets and the accumulated gravity of personal history.

The situation also brings up nagging, even embarrassing questions about the calculations and costs of duty: How much of my own life do I give over to the care of those who cared for me? How much "no" do I apply to my own life to answer the "yes" of their needs? Necessary questions, but ones that leave a taste of pettiness behind. None of us wants to think we're selfish creatures, but a situation like this ratifies the fear that we will be found to be exactly that.

Add to the suspicion of ungenerosity a liberal dose of ambiguity. A situation like this can deepen our humanity; it can also broadcast unflattering self-portraits. Most likely it will do both, in that edgily ambivalent way life has of raising and lowering our expectations in the same breath. Damned if you do....

In hearing my friend speak of all this, I couldn't help but wonder what I will do when my parents require me to come to their aid. No one is ever prepared for this; it's strictly OJT, and that is what's so frightening about it, not only because of the physical toil involved but also because of the questions it will raise about my sufficiency as a human being.

For the time being, at least, the situation has stabilized. Miriam is in the home; Robert is learning how to educate his muscles to handle his new apparatus. Partial closure has come to the panic, leaving some time for reflection and long-range planning. It has been a strange journey for them all. It has taken them out of their orbits, disciplined them through discomfort, annoyed them with necessity, saddened them beyond the power of words to express. The final kicker: deepened the texture of their lives by impoverishing them with loss.

Bette Davis was right about growing old: it's not for sissies. That goes as much for the caretakers as it does for citizens turning daily senior before our eyes.

Existential Eeyore, Part I

(September 2010)

The prompt for this essay and the next one comes from my having been told at various times by various people that I have an Eeyore strain, meaning (I think) that I am a glass-half-empty person, dysthymic if not depressed, lacking a certain fizziness. This nudged me to read Milne's two Pooh books, which I had never done -- and Eeyore's gotten a bad rap.

But before I get into that, some groundwork first because I found A.A. Milne's two Pooh books, *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The House at Pooh Corner*, really odd. Not charming odd or make-me-half-smile odd but odd odd, and not as bright as their surface appears.

A few academic writers have recognized this with tongue-in-cheek, such as the "Pathology in the Hundred Acre Wood: a neurodevelopmental perspective on A.A. Milne," with this daunting abstract: "Somewhere at the top of the Hundred Acre Wood a little boy and his bear play. On the surface it is an innocent world, but on closer examination by our group of experts we find a forest where neurodevelopmental and psychosocial problems go unrecognized and untreated."

(Another such article, though completely serious, is "The beast within:Winnie-the-Pooh reassessed," where the author sees the books as depicting "the raw brutality of the supposedly peaceful English countryside.")

But one doesn't have to do such tunneling to still notice how strange is the Hundred Acre Wood. No one has parents — the occasional mention of an uncle or a grandfather, but no parents, even with Christopher Robin. (And though Roo has Kanga, we know nothing about a father, and who knows anything about Rabbit's interspecies "relations" that trail behind him).

There's a social hierarchy demonstrated by geography, with Christopher Robin's house high enough to avoid being flooded and Eeyore's hovel down in the swamp, illustrating their relative worths in the community. (Everyone goes to Christopher Robin for advice because he has learning; no one goes to Eeyore for advice, even though he, too, has learning.) The newcomers in the forest -- Kanga, Roo, and Tigger -- though tolerated, are encouraged to live together (and thus separately from everyone else).

The material conditions of life in the Hundred Acre Wood are also strange. Pooh always seems to have honey in pots -- how? And Kanga gives extract-of-malt to Roo and Tigger -- where does she get it? Rabbit has condensed milk and bread -- again, how? (Piglet eats acorns and Eeyore thistles -- unprocessed foods -- and it's not clear what Owl takes in.) Who built the houses? Why is Eeyore the only one with a house not in a tree? And so on.

Maybe the author of "The beast within" has a point.

The Pooh characters, as Milne has drawn them, are also quite, well, odd.

Milne calls Pooh a bear of little brain but then has him compose poetry all the time and makes him quite capable of planning and organizing (such as when he sets up the rescue of Piglet from the flood by using an over-turned umbrella as a boat). Milne also makes him quite capable of completely misreading situations (the Woozle, the Heffalump), but no more so than Rabbit, Owl, or Christopher Robin.

But the oddest thing I find about Pooh is how selfish and gluttonous Milne has made his little bear — and how adept Milne becomes in getting his readers to accept these unflattering attributes as charming foibles.

For instance, in the tale about Eeyore's birthday, Pooh is bringing the donkey a gift of honey — but it never gets there because Pooh eats it enroute, showing up instead with an emptied pot. He gives Eeyore the empty vessel as the gift and never expresses any misgivings about the fact that it is an after-thought, a make-do gift, and that he has lied to his friend. Eeyore happily accepts it, and Pooh goes off satisfied — and the tale ends with a lie when Milne, as the narrator, tells his son Christopher Robin that he, Christopher, had given Eeyore a set of paints and prepared a big birthday party for Eeyore, which is a complete fabrication designed to make the little boy feel better about his forgetfulness.

In another chapter, Pooh goes off to visit Rabbit and more or less forces himself as a visitor upon the reluctant Rabbit, who, courteous nevertheless, feeds Pooh honey and condensed milk. Finally satisfied (though he does pry a bit to see if Rabbit has anything more to feed him), he leaves Rabbit's house, only to get stuck half-way-in/half-way-out the door because he has grown too fat. It takes a week of starving him, while Christopher Robin reads him stories, to finally pop him free, at which point Milne has him go his merry way without so much as expressing a concern about the inconvenience his unrestrained appetite has caused his fellow creatures.

Given the nature of the world in the Hundred Acre Wood, perhaps Eeyore can be forgiven his grumpiness since it seems filled with unreliable or overbearing creatures doing many pointless things (such as the expedition to the North Pole). For Eeyore, any one day can bring about the following:

> loss — Pooh and Piglet, in a snowstorm, transfer Eeyore's house from one side of the swamp to the other without telling him.
>
> assault — Tigger bounces him into the river or falls on him out of a tree (without thanking him for the rescue).
>
> abandonment — The search for Small, one of Rabbit's many relations, is over for two days before Rabbit bothers to tell Eeyore, who had continued to look all that time.
>
> being ignored — No one remembers his birthday.

At this point I have to think that Milne is up to something, either consciously or not, that is not only about writing a book for children that will give the warm fuzzies to generations of parents and children (not to mention oodles of money to movie studios).

Of all the characters in the two books, Eeyore is the only contrarian: he sees rain when it's sunny, he predicts calamity when success looms. He is the only character who gets angry (at the end of Chapter 5 of *Pooh Corner*, about the letter A and learning) -- not just peeved or irritated but enraged. He admires Christopher Robin but also fears what education will do to the lad (note Chapter 10 in *Winnie the Pooh* when Eeyore says that writing is over-rated).

All of this takes a bit of the piss out of the sentimentality of life in the Wood, making sure that the story does not become over-sweetened.

Milne also makes Eeyore hungry for the kind of recognition that so easily falls into Pooh's lap (which Eeyore resents, thinking very little of Pooh and feeling that Pooh is undeserving of the honors) — recognition for his learning, for his intentions and his deeds (such as on the expedition to the North Pole, when he sits with his tail in the water to save Roo) — and Milne has no one satisfy or even notice this hunger (except for perhaps Christopher Robin) and skews Eeyore's spirit toward the curmudgeonly and distrustful.

Why does Milne have such a character on his roster? What is he trying to tell his readers through such a presentation, especially when that presentation is so at odds with the rest of the books' timbre? And why would someone finger me as an Eeyore?

Existential Eeyore, Part II

(October 2010)

Perhaps another way to go at this is to ask the question this way: Everyone in the Pooh books has lessons to teach, or has had lessons assigned to them (Benjamin Hoff wrote two books about such lessoning, *The Tao of Pooh* and *The Te of Piglet*. What lessons does Eeyore have to offer?

Let's start with Hoff's rendition of Eeyore – call it the usual picture of the grey donkey. He calls it The Eeyore Effect (in the chapter of the same name in his *The Te of Piglet*). Here is his central description of the Effect (all the capitalized words are original) — it is Hoff in a huff:

> Eeyores, in other words, are Whiners. They believe the negative but not the positive and are so obsessed with What's Wrong that the Good Things in Life pass them by unnoticed. Are they the ones, then, to give us an accurate account of what life is about? If the universe were governed by the Eeyore Attitude, the whole thing would have collapsed ages ago. Everything in creation, from migrating hummingbirds to spinning planets, operates on the belief that It Can Be Done....Therefore, no society that wants to last is going to be guided by Eeyores. For Eeyores sneer at the very things that are needed most for survival and prosperity. (59-60)

Well.

Hoff goes on to associate Eeyore and his supposed Attitude with negative-reporting media, the Puritans, Critics (yes, the capitalized ones), a horrible education system (the Education Eeyores), and, weirdly enough, people he calls the Eeyore Amazons, hyper-feminists who perversely act from a hyper-masculinity rather than from a true femininity.

In Hoff's bipolarish world of the East and West, of the natural vs. the inorganic, Norman Vincent Peale vs. Arthur Schopenhauer, the lessons that Eeyore offers are not worth learning because, in his view, all Eeyore ever does is "make others feel small, especially if they're smaller than he is [which] makes him look big..." (53) Eeyore is a passive-aggressive bully, a buzz-kill, a Tao damper. He acts how we shouldn't.

Is this the reason, then, Milne includes him in the Pooh menagerie? A taste of the chili pepper to cut the saccharine?

Not exactly, I don't think, because Milne has him behave in ways that are not just counter or contrary to the other residents, or as a commentary upon their actions. Eeyore's actions are more complicated than that, in part because,

except for Christopher Robin, he's the only one who goes through any changes in his behavior.

Eeyore is the only character that Milne gives fullness to because he is unsettled, unsettling, contrary, polite but not obsequious, snarly in his humility, purposefully cranky, intelligent, unillusioned. Everyone else in the Wood is somewhat monotone, which makes them easier to "love" (as many generations have): Pooh's artful cluelessness masking as innocence, Piglet's perpetual timorousness, Tigger's goofiness, Kanga and Roo's mother/son act, Owl's predictable wrong-headedness – like characters in a sitcom, they retain an unconfusing personality resistant to change. Never will Pooh turn to the others and say, "My life feels suddenly very empty – and honey will do nothing to change that feeling."

With Eeyore, on the other hand, Milne presents his readers with a challenge, a specifically Christian challenge. It is easy to love the loveable characters – anyone can practice Christian charity with someone who doesn't talk back and requires no sweat equity.

Eeyore is the prickly character that requires one to be a real Christian because he is not willing to play the game. To love Eeyore means working to gain his respect, since he won't give it to you without you making the effort to win it. To love Eeyore means accepting him as he is and foregoing any impulse to change or "improve" him. To love Eeyore means accepting the possibility that he will not love you back – no quid for the quo.

And all of this is complicated by Eeyore's capacity for charity and compassion, though he does not wear his heart upon his sleeve.

Take the last chapter of *Pooh Corner*, when Christopher Robin is going away and Rabbit has asked Eeyore to compose a "rissolution" about this sad situation. His attitude in reading the poem out loud to the others and then presenting it to Christopher Robin unread is a bluster that masks his sadness at Christopher's leave-taking (since Christopher Robin is the only one he considers his equal). Notice how beautifully Milne captures the way an aching heart ties our tongue at the very moment when we wish we could be perfectly articulate:

> "Christopher Robin," he said, "we've come to say – to give you – it's called – written by – but we've all – because we've heard, I mean we all know – well, you see, it's – we – you – well, that, to put it as shortly as possible, it is what it is." He turned round angrily on the others and said, "Everyone crowds round so in this Forest. There's no Space. I never saw a more

> Spreading lot of animals in my life, and all in the wrong places. Can't you see that Christopher Robin wants to be alone? I'm going." And he humped off.
>
> Not quite knowing why, the others began edging away, and when Christopher Robin had finished reading POEM, and was looking up to say, "Thank you," only Pooh was left.

It's no coincidence that Eeyore's food is the thistle, with both its nettles and beautiful blossom.

Eeyore's life is not easy because he is making an effort to be actual and consequent rather than give in to what he would consider the easier ways of conformity or faith.

It is also a life not sufficiently nutritious, for it needs some Pooh and Tigger for leavening – even Eeyore, at various times in the books, experiences joy, and part of him is always pleased when someone seeks him out, even if he is distrustful of the impulse that brings visitors to his doorstep.

The core of Milne's Eeyore is a hybrid of the strong wish that he, too, could have Pooh's charmed, angels-watching-over-him kind of life butting up against what he sees around him: venality, insincerity, entropy. It is the Christian dilemma: the ache to return to the unobligated life in Eden is grafted onto a body fated to die and a mind that can never forget this.

Eeyore always castigates his fellows for not thinking enough, for not seeing things as they are, but this is in part an expression of Eeyore's own desire for life to stop being thistles and more like honey. His "gloominess," if that is the right word, is his recognition of the wrongness of Hamlet's declaration that "There's nothing either good or bad/but thinking makes it so." We can think whatever we want, but, as Hamlet finds out, and Eeyore knows, there is only so far we can go in fooling ourselves – reality always demands that we notice it and honor it – what is sarcasm and irony but two ways to do this?

And, as Hamlet says, once we are infected with consciousness, there is no going back to Eden except in ways that are, in some sense, fraudulent: yoga, meditation, Christianized good works, and so on. All efforts to forget, and by forgetting cleanse the virus.

And yet, without the practice of those fraudulences, much goodness and light in the world passes us by and does not get done, because out of them flows compassion and charity. And even Eeyore would concede that at times it

feels good to forget, to let the sarcastic and ironic slip away, to just "do" without reasoning why.

As the writer Spider Robinson said, back in 1977, "If a person who indulges in gluttony is a glutton, and a person who commits a felony is a felon, then God is an iron." The whole moral universe of human life seems based on this. Even if one is an atheist, something out there seems to bend all of human life toward irony and jokiness.

So I think the characterizing of me as an Eeyore is not quite right – that is, the common Eeyore, Piglet's gloomy one. Yes, there is that about me, but not just that. I am also one with thistles, who will be polite and courteous but is also rageful underneath, who distrusts learning's ability to teach us anything yet who never stops hungering to learn, who always thinks life gives us less than what it promises, that sentimentality is both comforting and untruthful, that life is dry rather than moist, cool rather than warm – that we are all fragile blusters of pain always on the cusp of annihilation who mythmake to soften this condition and gain some respite (because who can live for any length of time on the cusp? but that is where all good art gets made, so someone needs to live there).

If what I've said about Eeyore is right, then I'm glad to be Eeyore.

Exposing Exposition

(November 2010)

One of the pay-offs of doing a goodly amount of reviewing lately has been the opportunity to see my craft from a different angle — to look under the hood, so to speak, and watch the machinery whirl away.

One of the pen-nibs all playwrights use, at some point, is exposition — that seemingly important presentation of data that the writer believes are essential for the audience to "get" the meaning of the play. A couple of forms of exposition get used. One is the informing kind, such as a list of kings in a historical play or "news flashes" between scenes to set a time-context for the action. The other is "backstory," a character's psychological CV presented to explain behavior or justify action. Both kinds of exposition are essentially historico-psychological in nature, bringing something that's already occurred to bear on the present and future of the play's characters.

I've found that exposition is usually done badly — that is, you can hear the wind-up and pitch of it immediately: "Do you remember when we...?" or "Explain the argument to me again" or "I don't understand" or (as an action onstage) "Let me read this letter out loud that I'm handwriting." The writer's purpose is obvious: I believe that you will need this information in order to have a critical understanding of the play.

What is not so easily proven is that the audience actually uses the information in this way, or even uses it at all. I know I usually don't, for several reasons. First , the action of a good play is forward — there is no time to pause, reflect, apply, conclude. (Perhaps after the play, at a drink or dinner, and maybe during intermission, but certainly not in media res.)

Second, it's usually not necessary. If there is an explosive dramatic nugget at the core of the piece, there is no real need for a visit to the past or a review of a list of "why's." The issue at hand, in the present tense, should be sufficient to hold our interest. Third, characters are not people — they are devices we use to tell a story, no different, in essence, from light, sound, set design. I don't mind, in a play of mine, if an actor wants to supply a backstory to a character, but I generally do not, at least as an actual working part of the script.

This doesn't mean that I don't have a past tense in my plays. It means that I try to make anything like exposition part of the dramatic flow. I never want an audience member to suddenly feel that wind-up-and-pitch of the expository

delivery. As much as I can, I banish phrases like “Do you remember?” and “Well, in 1943, in Beirut…” This makes writing a script much more difficult — pleasantly so, because it demands that I become inventive about how the story’s information slips over the stage’s apron and into the audience.

For instance, in a piece I’m working on now, one of the characters is a bioengineer creating a new process for studying brain function, called “optogenetics.” The other is a philosophy professor at the end of his existential tether (not a bad place, really, for a philosopher) who wants in on the upcoming human trials of the process. The challenge is to tell the audience about optogenetics without letting loose the odor of exposition. The prof has a touch of the histrionic about him, so I have him sing (to the embarrassed but intrigued response of the bioengineer) a hymn to optogenetics. It gets out the info the audience needs to understand the process but does it (I hope) in a more theatrically interesting way, in a way true to the character and without using a stale trick like the bioengineer giving a lecture, with the audience as students (a device used recently in a play I reviewed titled “Sweet Sweet Motherhood”).

In order not to bore or distract an audience, all exposition needs to be folded in to dramatic action — one should get the information without ever feeling that it has been delivered or ladled-out. And just enough is the right amount — audiences are always less interested in the information than they are how the information warps the dramatic space-time continuum around the characters and their struggles to come to grips with something about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The Nature of Human Nature

(December 2010)

I ran into an interesting dilemma recently about a play I reviewed.

The play told the story of a returning Iraqi war veteran afflicted with PTSD. Loosely based on Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* (operative word is "loosely"), the soldier ends up murdering the mother of his child after her affair with the Sergeant. Many things irritated me about the production, but what irritated me most of all was a treacly director's note in the program that the production was "respectfully dedicated to the men and women who are in military service…"

In my review I took the writer and director to task for producing a play about a man's anguish without ever examining the conditions that caused that anguish, namely, politicians sending men and women to slaughter and be slaughtered and then abandoning them when they came home. To dedicate something like this to our soldiers in arms was to act in a mendacious manner, trying to get patriotic cred on the cheap.

My editor, rightly, told me to tone it down (and she should have added, "Stop rewriting the man's play!"), which I did and re-submitted the review.

But I don't apologize for what I initially wrote. The play's effort to portray the soldier's pain falls into the category of plays that my theater compatriot and I call "so well-meant." Yes, the humanitarian impulse pulses there, along with the didactic effort to inform us of conditions like these and the melodramatic sentimentality of the poor unfortunate being tugging on our heart strings.

But this "so well-meaning" falsifies the very thing it means so well about when it doesn't take note of the "why" -- in this case, why the solider has the pain that he feels. To be sure, the play includes a well-meaning but overworked therapist who tries to get the solider medicated and stabilized -- the writer's nod to bureaucratic sloth and indifference.

Still, not enough. It doesn't finger the scoundrels, it doesn't advocate for the victim, and, more importantly, it doesn't indict the audience, in whose name all of this mayhem was prosecuted.

The further question, of course, is why should any writer pay any attention to what I've just said. Writers, rightly, should be free to write whatever they wish to write about and do whatever they can do to get it produced. But I am not really stating a prescription here, a litmus test for authenticity. Instead, it's a comment

about an insufficiency of imagination, and a specific kind of imagination at that, one that conceives of a human nature as either psychologized (where actions come from DSM-IV states of being) or essentialized (a transcendent "that's the way people are" that cuts cross cultural and historical lines) — in either case, making them ahistorical isolates.

I conceive of people, and thus my characters, as "materialized," that is, creatures defined by the material conditions of their lives: everything historically contingent, driven by economics (i.e., how they get their living), subject to chance and irony, nothing with any transhistorically dependable truth to it. These material conditions are as much characters in the play as the character to which they are attached, and I have to bring them in to shape the character/world of the play.

This also means that because material conditions can change on a dime, my characters are liable to change on a dime as well, unconstrained by any essential natures or psychologized profiles, and they change because they fight to manage how they live within (or without) the changed conditions of their lives.

I wish my fellow playwrights would expand their thinking about what constitutes the human nature structuring both their characters and the narrative demands of the plays they are writing. Too often they confine their characters and stories within, at least to me, an outmoded and theatrically unsuccessful concept of what drives people and the lives they live. To write a play about a returning Iraqi war veteran with PTSD simply to make him a victim without offering some deeper investigation of the who, what, where, when, why, and how is to miss an opportunity to make interesting theatre caused by an insufficiently examined template of what makes human beings "human."

As I said above, why should any writer pay any attention to what I've just said. But I hope they do, if only to argue the point with me.

2009

The Theatre of Edward L. Bernays

(January 2009)

I have to admit (with all respect given to our fearless editor) that I disliked this writing challenge the moment he laid it down. I still dislike it. I dislike it in the way I dislike those arbitrary end-of-the-year, pre-New-Year's-day lists of the hundred most famous (fill in the blank). I dislike it because of its emphasis on the mythology of the exceptional work or the exceptional artist, as if historical context, luck, chicanery, and the herd instinct didn't play some role. I dislike it for its bias toward the academic and the élite, as if only authorized artists (dubbed so by whom?) quality for the imprimatur.

And "influential" -- defined how? Is this influence only supposed to be benign, or for "the good" (whatever that sentimentalized notion means)? Can "influence" include the evil, the malignant, the dystopian? For instance, the Bible would fall under both categories, depending upon whether one wanted to emphasize the social-justice angle of the Gospels or the end-time visions of Revelations, both of which have spawned social movements of great force and pressure. And what about geographic range? And chronological range (especially durability over time)?

But I will put aside all these considerations and kvetches and try to get into the spirit of the challenge, and for my choice I choose, in the realm of theatre, Edward L. Bernays, often called "The Father of Public Relations," who died at the age of 103 in 1995 and who began his work in the "engineering of consent" (as he called it) during and just after World War I. (He worked on Woodrow Wilson's Creel Commission, otherwise known as the "Committee on Public Information," to foster public support for America's entry into the Great War.)

Bernays, who was a nephew of Sigmund Freud (his father was Ely Bernays, brother of Freud's wife Martha Bernays, and his mother was Freud's sister, Anna), combined Freud's ideas with the study of crowd psychology by GustaveLeBon in France and Wilfred Trotter in Britain to create methods to control and direct public behavior. As he asked in his 1928 book *Propaganda*, "If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, is it not possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing about it?" And he answered his own question in the affirmative by a career dedicated to, as the title of first book in 1923 declared, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*.

Bernays did not see his work as negating democracy but actually making democracy possible by getting disparate and disunited people to work together in ways that would quell their instincts toward aggression by uniting them in common acts:

> The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country....We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized. Vast numbers of human beings must cooperate in this manner if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society....In almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons... who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind.

His work as a "public relations counsel" (the title he preferred) has been well-documented, and the documentation shows how well mass-marketing in a mass culture works to herd people's desires in one direction or another, whether it's to buy soap or to "engineer consent" for the war in Iraq.

It's not the point of this essay to defend or criticize what Bernays did and started. It's to show that, in terms of the essay challenge — "the one most influential work/artist in the past 100 years" — the effects of Bernays' form of theatrical manipulation far outstrip the influence of any other artist or artistic production, both in breadth (the millions of people) and depth (how we are all, in America, to one degree or another, a mass citizen of a mass culture). The twentieth century had the shape and tenor it did in large measure because of the ideas and practices started by Bernays.

The Curse of the Stage Manager

(February 2009)

My father once said to me that he has always enjoyed handling paper — (re)arranging it, cataloging it, organizing it.

I pointed my finger at him and exclaimed, "So that explains it!"

Because I, too, have that same invasive inclination, and I find it such a curse — call it the Curse of the Stage Manager.

For many years, before I started writing plays, I stage-managed for a large theatre in Manchester, NH, as well as in smaller theatres in the area. There is no real art to being a good stage manager — the key (aside from an abundance of patience) is, first, making a list, and, second, doing every item on that list when it needs to be done.

In short, it's all about the paper.

I was a good stage manager, a belt-and-suspenders stage manager — and I called light and sound cues in pretty much the same rhythm every performance. In other words, I made sure the paper was in the proper order and easy to read.

I have been the same way in my jobs, all of which have brought out, in one degree or another, my stage-managerness: teaching (get those syllabi done and handed out!), office management (it's all about the paper), freelance writing (schedule the jobs and get them done).

But I can't say that, in the end, stage-managing brings about a deep satisfaction with life, because entropy is always active — the papers get shuffled, cues are missed, people don't follow the rules, and so on — and much energy has to be spent on splicing back together what had once been together but no longer is.

As Carole King says, nothing ever stays in one place for very long, and that can be exhausting.

And thus a double curse, really — first, the uncontestable urge to arrange and order, and, second, the impossible-to-resist urge to re-order when the order gets whacked, even while knowing the second law of thermodynamics is always engaged.

But I am now at a point in my life when I no longer want to stage manage — that is, I no longer trust the order that the stage manager brings into being, and I don't want to spend any more time working under that order's regime.

So, what is one to do?

I don't know.

I don't know into what other sorts of productions I would like to place myself.

I don't know what sort of order would not feel oppressive and heavy-harnessed — we have so few chances in our society to experience regimes of order that lift and carbonate.

I don't know which words are now worth reading — or whether words at all bring anything good in their wake.

I just don't know.

So I start this new year off on the look-out for a new look-out, to stage a new stage — most of all, to rid myself of the urge to paper things over and stay in a comfortable voice.

It is time to stop managing and see what the management has to say about that.

Rage, Rage...

(April 2009)

Perhaps it is art's nature to heal — but during these meltdown days, when bailout money goes to the derivative vandals and this oh-so-vaunted system folds in on itself like bad origami, I would argue that any healing we are going to experience will not come from calls to bipartisanship (why can't Obama govern like he actually won the election?) or hope. I think healing — useful, purgative, truthful healing — will only come from rage, honest moral rage at the stupidities, lies, and fuckings-over of the princes in power.

And for good measure, as a target of this cleansing rage, I would add in our pretend culture. All of the material wealth we Americans have sucked out of the earth has only made us anxiety-ridden, greedy, blindered, perpetually unmoored, ignorantly arrogant — perfect citizens for the capitalist order but unfit for the blessings of life. We have hooked ourselves up to and on to values that, on the face of it, appear unimpeachable, such as the pursuit of individual freedom and the right to an unbridled imagination, but which isolate us from each other and give us only corporate fodder on which to feed a sense of self: how slim, how pretty, how rich, how busy, how well-clothed, how heavily accoutered. And since all of these shift on the whims of marketers and markets, no self feeding at these troughs can ever rest clear and calm, satisfied without the worm of appetite twisting in the gut. This capitalist dis-order — soon may it rot.

Rage apocalyptic. Rage drenched in scorn. Rage that flings the spit off the teeth at supersonic speeds. Rage that makes it impossible to forget and to sleep well at night.

How heals rage? By first reaming out the pipes, by blowing the stink off oneself (as a good friend of mine once said). By getting back to a flat-bottomed point where one can feel unduped and unused, where one can rest momentarily bleached out and exhausted, as the body and mind will feel when purged of poisons and alarms. This, at least, begins a true beginning, this is what forty fasting devil-stuffed days in the desert brings: preparation by erasure, by canceling the old eyes, letting silence rinse the mouth, flushing the knotted jargons from the ears, sloughing off our careful calluses, inviting the nerves to stop hallucinating on cue.

But when, at the end of this first beginning, the water washes away the desert grime, when simple cloth drapes a breathing-again skin, when verb

waits without impatience to answer back — this is only the starting canvas, the anticipatory page, the choreographic twitch, the unchiseled stone. Nothing has been healed yet until the pen begins to name the bastards that made the desert necessary, until the chisel cracks through the blather that has polluted the air, until the brush laves color across the enforced greys that we are tricked into believing are our only choices, until the arm stabbing into the space draws the body behind it in defiance of lines. Then begins a rage artistic, not just to void everything null — not just to lay waste, as due as that might be — but also, by wasting everything double-tongued and false-hearted, to make people hunger for the desert so that when the earth steams in its new scoured emptiness, they can crack open their fired skins and anchor roots in a refreshed soil.

This rage is the only reason to make art, is the only thing that can inspire art that matters, that will outlast fashion and profit. This rage is not about art made to soothe the ego, elevate the ultra-personal, diddle the private. Its power comes from a passionate impersonality, a fiery coolness, a fierce gentleness — and a hatred of everything false, slavish, stupid, predatory. In the end it is an art about making things better, about showing people how they can act better than their selfishness and fears allow them to act. It is ultimately, then, about love. Not the sentimentalized tripe and self-involved silliness spooned into us by the wardens of our entertainment culture, but something much harder-edged, without schmaltz and dreaminess, almost in the realm of sacrifice, what Christ must have felt on the cross, both human and inhuman (since he was both), both heart-shattering and released. This is a rage which is a healing where the wound is more important than the medicine, since the wound is what keeps us alive and awake, the wound, as Howard Barker puts it, that the rope makes as we are pulled from the swamp.

An art that keeps the wound open, rage that cleanses, love both suckling and sundering — these will heal the affliction of being alive in this country in the era of the bipartisan meltdown.

Old Lady on the Ten Speed

(May 2009)

It had been a usual day in the mundane contact sport called "life in New York": battling to get a seat on the bus to Port Authority, streaming with the other drones into the maw of the subway (a hell-mouth if there ever was one), shaken-around by the arthritic and uneven train-tracks of the A-line running north, harnessing myself to once again walk into the chaos of my workspace. As I went through my obligations, I "Oh Poor Michael'd" myself, nurturing an untoxic but sticky self-pity.

I had just arrived on the street that leads to my office when a little old lady on a ten-spot, drop-handled touring bike slowly eased past me, her seat set so low that her knees churned high like the two piston arms on a paddlewheeler. A cane, aluminum, tipped by grey rubber, dangled off the left handlebar. Her back was S'd by scoliosis and pitched forward by osteoporosis, and a thatch of white hair riffled like a reed tuft in a breeze.

I stopped short and watched her with a mixture of compassion and astonishment, as if someone had slapped me in the face and said, "Shape up!"; and my self-pity dissolved in an instant. Not because I felt the smug reassurance of "There but for the grace of God go I." No, I can only describe what happened as my heart cracking open: an immediate, right-between-the-eyes respect for how much energy this human being was expending in keeping her own heart intact as she made her inexorable way.

Living is a tough business; to paraphrase what Betty Davis said about old age, life is not for sissies. And because living can produce so much struggle and dismay, we often wear a thick hide of self-mastery and "Oh poor me" around our hearts for both medicine and barricade, especially when daily evidence reiterates how easily we can lose everything in a flash of fire or clash of armies. But as the paraplegic cartoonist John Callahan says, self-pity is like wetting your pants: at first it's comfortably warm, and then it turns very cold. The old lady on the ten-speed reminded me how cold and unearned my self-pity was, how important it is to make the struggle even if I didn't immediately understand why I should or where I will end up.

But her image did not just say, in some grim puritanical tone, to suffer adversity because it will improve the character. When my heart cracked at

seeing her, I also had to smile at the pure "Yes" of her paddlewheeling down the street. Against age, against rusting knees, against pedestrian traffic, she steamed home. Certainly I, with mobile knees and half her age, could do the same. I worked hard converting the rest of the day into light and patience.

Doing the Dramaturg

(June 2009)

What a dramaturg does gets a fuzzy explanation in American theatre, but primarily the dramaturg serves the needs of the rest of the production's crew — for information, for insight, for text review, and so on.

I like doing dramaturg work and so agreed to work with a production that will bring a new script to the stage, an adaptation of a novel, something I have done in my own work and feel I know a lot about.

The producer and director want me to work with the playwright on his script — or, more accurately, to get the playwright to enliven the script in dramatic ways, to move it away from its somewhat pedestrian mimicking of the source work and make it a true dramatic work.

Except that the playwright, despite having a roster of productions (all of them adaptations, by the way — he's said several times that he can't come up with a narrative on his own), didn't really have the "dramatic sense" a playwright needs, that instinct of how, as one does with a good joke, to set-up and pay-off with every word, every line, every scene.

Instead, I had a playwright married to his words, i.e., suggested changes were taken as challenges and discussions were limited to whether the proposals for change added or took away information. It became difficult to discuss anything about subtext, building a character's "arc," and so on. I had a stenographer for a playwright. And, as I learned after our first discussions, it's easier to be Daniel in the lion's den than work with a playwright married to his words.

I don't fault the playwright for any of this — at least in the theatre, the dramatic writer is respected as a writer and is not treated as a hack for hire, and so he has every right — and a duty — to protect and defend the constitution of his words. And my suggestions have to be offered as such — even if I *know* the solution to the dramatic problem, I cannot impose it but simply suggest, cajole, demonstrate.

This process also got me thinking about "ownership" when it comes to doing theatre. In one sense, the legalistic sense, the playwright owns the script — he registers it with the WGA or the copyright office, he puts the © symbol on the title page, and so on and so on. His rights to his creation are thus protected (at least until many decades after his death).

But the meaning of ownership becomes fuzzy once the artifact of the script gets put into the bodies of the actors and the hands of the designers and the collaborative mill of the theatre begins to grind. The production process is not about excavating the page for its hidden trove; much of what will happen on stage has not been defined or even imagined by the author. In this respect, the script acts more like a recipe: a guide towards a particular end but with room for the variation of ingredients, spices, timing, presentation. And as with most recipes, their original author is less important than the current "chef" reading the recipe and putting the instructions into gear.

Of course, the difference is that, unlike the original recipe-writer, the playwright/recipe-writer is often sitting in the room with his variation sensor on high. And this is where I would say that the playwright has to learn how to accommodate the alchemy that is going on around him. The fruit ripening in front of him is, and is not, his play. It resembles his play, but it is not the same thing as his play. People are discovering connections and meanings that he didn't know were there because they are bringing the forces of their selves to bear and infiltrating the recipe with new and unaccounted for spices. Designers are extracting the third dimension from the flat plane of the script's pages, bringing the unimagined to life.

If a director calls for line changes or rearrangements, wants a scene deleted or expanded, a character's motivation re-examined, the playwright can't take this as a challenge to his authority or a criticism of the writing but should take it as a chance to re-think what he thinks he knows so well, as a way to re-test his tested solutions to the dramatic questions at hand — in short, to fully participate in the transformative morphing that is going on around him and not simply sit there, Delphic-like, holding onto the sacred writ.

Yes, the playwright still "owns" the play, but it is so much better if, during the production process, he can let the play, now fully staffed and provisioned, own him, and that everything that he had thought set and cemented had now slipped its moorings and was available for a fresh report.

I wish this playwright had more "play" in him in this regard, but he doesn't, and so we have to submit to this situation and do our best to work around the roadblocks he's set up by working against the grain he's laid down, prying out surprises from unsurprising material, and so on.

For me, this experience has become another confirmation of why I want to write for the theatre: the chance every production brings to unseat the set-piece, to freshen the eyes, to be "disowned" in the best possible manner.

Life of the Daily Adequate

(August 2009)

My job this night was to review a show for a publicist-friend who gets me tickets in return for posting my thoughts on Scene4. The show, part of the Soho Think Tank's summer festival, Ice Factory, played at the Ohio Theatre on Wooster Street in New York, the street which named the Wooster Group (which has its own den just a few doors down). The Ohio is in a building that used to be a textile factory, and its large high open space floored with tongue-and-grooved oak is intersected with thick columns holding up the floors overhead. By next year, the theatre will probably be gone — the building owners, who reprieved its lease for a year, don't see a theatre as part of a Soho now boutiqued and malled to within an inch of its life.

The show, *A Wonderland*, came off the way it came off (see my review in QReviews), but two of the individual performers stood out. And for some reason (which I will get to in a moment), I did what I usually do not do: I hung around until they came out so that I could congratulate them personally. I don't usually do this because of a personal reticence about gushing and personal-space-invasions as well as a desire not to put people in the awkward position of having to make-believe a politeness they may not want to feel.

But stay I did. And thus this happened.

First, important to know: I stayed behind to speak to two women — the two performers. And as I spoke to the first (I only sensed this on the slant, so to speak, in the moment, unpeeling it more later), I felt myself slip into not only compliment but also — what else could it be called? — flirtation. Not flirtation with the intention of winning something — contractual flirtation, so to speak — but flirtation composed of cleverness and repartee and shared theatre-speak and the warm enjoyment of connection (no matter how unrooted and brief).

And as we badinaged back and forth, I also noted the still-on stage lights pouring out their heat, the shuttlecock of other conversations, the slight sweat-sheen on her forehead, her grip as we shook hands (the faux-embrace of strangers lies not within my repertoire) — and I felt opened-up and opened-out in a way not found — not even possible — in my life of the daily adequate husband, office manager, writer, theatre-maker.

The second compliment-session went the same way, with the same pried-open feeling, this time in conversation with a smoking, beer-drinking, snap-

talking actor/musician who flummoxed me, when she said she knew my name, by playfully demanding that she wanted to see who I had in my phone — and I realized, as I fumbled-out some stupid comment that I barely had a phone, much less one that served me that way, that my phone is not my lifeline, which also meant that she and I had one, probably two, generations between us technologically and culturally and that that difference, in that post-performance moment before the daily adequate re-asserted itself, felt immensely attractive — no, felt full of possibility — for re-description, re-direction, being re-bodied (older body with younger body crossed the mind, how could it not?).

The moment felt in play. I felt in play. Outside the adequate. And more than adequate.

And just so you, dear readers, do not take this rendition simply as middle-aged-man-musing about regret and loss (which even I wouldn't find interesting), I had the same feeling the following day inspired by the non-fleshly medium of *Radio Macbeth*, produced and performed by SITI, founded many moons ago by Anne Bogart and others. Using nothing more than wooden folding chairs, two tables, three microphones, excellent sound and lighting design, exquisitely timed movements, and Shakespeare's script (amended), they created the excitement that comes from seeing the familiar made strange in ways that made it familiar all over again. At the end, standing and ovationing with everyone else, that same opened-out/in-play feeling infused me — theatre/art making the daily adequate inadequate, with joy as the distillate.

What goeth on here?

In my twenties, when I finished the graduate degree that enabled me to go out and teach — i.e., start an adult career (in both meanings of "career") — I had also had pretentions to take up dancing as a career. And there came a moment, that moment — I think most of us who consider ourselves artists have had that moment. I had interviewed for a teaching job in a nearby rural high school, and I told myself that if I did not get the job, then I would go to New York and do whatever dancers do there until they dance or do something else. The phone rang — the time and place where I took the call still tactile in my body even though forty years have passed — the teaching offer came through, and I took it as a sign of the road I should follow.

Wrong road.

I would say that the course I've followed in my life has consisted of this wrestling match between the daily adequate (at which I am very good, being

my father's son, the son of an Air Force major born in the Depression and who is vitalized by doing what is always dutiful) and what makes the daily adequate completely inadequate as a way of living. For many years I stage-managed for a large theatre in Manchester, NH, and during every production I did, no matter how stressing, I always felt at home/in place from the time of the first table-reading to the final set-strike, in a way that the daily adequate has never given me.

This wrestling match has only gotten more strenuous as time has advanced. At my age (55), I now get inundated with information about how to prolong my time upon this earth, from AARP solicitations to article after article in a magazine the Marvelous Maria-Beatriz gets, "Scientific American Mind," chockfull of readings about sharpening the brain with exercise, finding the alpha waves in meditation, reducing stress, avoiding depression, the value of play, all coached in perky-speak.

When I stayed behind to compliment the performers, the flirtatious energy felt truly playful, unrigged and unforced, unlike the "Mind" articles, which all seem geared toward a play manufactured to offset the "stress of modern life," as if we should accept this stress as a given (like a parent's "because I said so!"), something chromosomal, like a force of nature, instead of the outcome of a system purposed to suck every last energy out of us for someone else's profit. It is play defined to make the daily adequate palatable, to keep us calm and fit during our lengthening terms of service, often by (surprise, surprise) buying products or services from corporations ready to relax us into old age and beyond.

I find myself bucking more and more against this, trying to get back to my mid-twenties road-fork and take the other direction, the one less traveled by, resenting the way the weight of the daily adequate infiltrates and slants all decisions. I am feeling less and less able and willing to make the daily bargains of setting aside *these* hours for the necessity of money-making in order to get *those* hours for the things that actually nourish and leaven, in-between doing the little tunings that make any day in New York get-throughable: subway stress reducer here, the get-my-banana-from-Sharif-the-fruit-vendor-as-a-break there, the dozens of other daily analgesic routines.

Oh boo-hoo, my mother would say: being an adult means doing things you don't want to do.

Sigh. Yes. But.

My reading at the moment is a re-reading of a favorite book, Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, a main theme of which is what he considers a driving force of being a liberal: continual linguistic re-description of oneself (one's "self") as a never-finishing process of self-creation so that all the past — that is, all the brute or mindless forces that worked one over in the process of living — can be re-cast by a re-worked language in such a way that a person can say of his or her life, "Thus I willed it."

This is how I will get back to that fork in the road. This is how I will blunt the daily adequate. This is how flirtation will reign. This how real play will play out and not be confused with corporate anodynes. For the art that I need to create is not, or is not just, the plays, poems, essays, stories, novels, reviews but my own self — as it has always been the right work to do but which has gotten diverted and crimped over the time I have been serving my sentence as an adult.

God, this sounds and feels so adolescent, does it not? Yes it does. And it might be embarrassing (with all sorts of potential for comic disasters — her with him? ha ha ha ha) if I didn't do what I have just committed myself to do: re-describe in order to re-create. Yes, then, "adolescent," but, as I will live it, "recovered adolescent" — adolescent re-covered (re-skinned) with new understandings, and "recovered," as in saved from some dustbin of supposedly used-up metaphors.

Because once the flirtatious energy gets loosed, the play force popped open, who in his or her right mind would ever want to put those genies back in their bottles for the sake of preserving the daily adequate and its chloroform ways? "Flirt" and "play" are the daemons we need, in that old Greek sense of the word as attendant and attentive guardians (see, already re-describing, re-scripting) — companionable and pricking, ironic and restorative, finger-in-the-eye and hand-on-the-cheek.

Let us all become as daemonic as possible — what possible harm can it do us that being adequate already hasn't done?

The Puritan Soul

(September 2009)

This essay roots itself in a discussion with Marvelous Maria-Beatriz about vacations. In our office, the boss gives us the first two weeks of August off as a kind of gift for having worked hard from the previous September. The only problem with this is that the "world" still continues: phone calls come in, mail comes in, emails come in, problems must be resolved, and so on and so on.

Dealing with that falls to me, as the office manager, so I can never take those two weeks off. I may get a day or so here and there, but generally I drag myself off the office to make sure the center still runs even though every one else is somewhere else.

The Marvelous MB chides me incessantly about this, insisting that I take the vacation time I've been handed. I smile, nod, murmur "You're right" — but I don't really believe it.

Because there is a part of me that likes not taking the vacation time, that likes going into the office when no one else is there and getting done the many projects I always have in hand, that enjoys the feeling of not giving into the luxury that everyone else has so readily indulged.

The odd-angled (some may say twisted) enjoyment, that is, felt by the puritan soul.

I've always felt that vacations were a cheat anyway — dispensations granted by corporate overlords so that the workers don't go completely revolutionary on them. The return from a vacation has always depressed me — coming back to the unchanged conditions that made the vacation necessary in the first place, any centeredness or clarity immediately evaporated in the mosh pit of catching up with all that is unfinished and demanding attention. Much prefer just skipping the whole charade.

I don't necessarily like my job, I don't necessarily enjoy being a wage slave, but I do enjoy the satisfaction that comes from accomplishing the tasks I set out for myself, even if those tasks are, on the face of it, mundane, dulling, insignificant. Because, for the puritan soul, "work" is the thing that makes a life a human life — the physical/intellectual engagement with the stuff of the world in order to shape the world. Just because much of the work we are forced to do these days is soulless and silly doesn't lessen its importance in how it feeds our

concept of ourselves as active and consequential beings. “To go to work” may not make me feel effervescent, but it does mean that I am a person with a place to go and a purpose to serve.

I also can’t deny that there’s also a bit of egotistical smugness here as well in not doing what everyone else has chosen to do, that I was the one that stayed connected while everyone else went off and disconnected themselves. This self-satisfaction comes, in part, from the puritan soul’s disdain for much of what passes as “life” in our modern corporatized culture, as a life given over to too much self-indulgence (obesity, iPods), and self-deception (Limbaugh, religion), intellectually and physically lazy, infantile in its demands that existence be fair or comprehensible or comforting. Anything that grinds against that grain is grist for the puritan soul.

The puritan soul also aims for a simple design aesthetic — spare, clean-lined, restricted. I see this in myself it ways that drive the Marvelous MB a bit crazy. I have my rules: my coffee always goes in a certain ceramic mug I bought in Arlington (MA) that is embossed with a raven; my small eatables go on a square Japanese-figured plate; I use a certain spoon that has a wide rather than narrow bowl; my bowl for cereal comes from the same Arlington shop with the same raven figure. And many others. The rules may seem constricted and constricting but, for me, they provide boundaries; boundaries provide topography; topography provides direction, if not certainty (and the uncertainty provides space for the occasionally necessary serendipity, just to keep things interesting and ironical).

The puritan soul has its trials. Because at heart it is ironical, it can never take anything as settled or completely authoritative — it can only have faith in a faithless view of the world. And simplicity is not such an easy discipline. Thoreau, in one of his journals, once said that learning how not to want was the hardest thing he had ever tried to do — doubly so in a culture like ours that feeds on turning every passing want into an insistent need that can then be marketed and sold.

But I like this soul — it fits me, it fits me into the world in a way that makes it possible for me to enjoy it without being seduced by it, to laugh at its imperfections without (too much) smugness because of all the imperfect beings around me, I head the list, and it is my imperfections that keep me balanced.

Back to the discussion about vacations.

The Marvelous MB and I will take a trip in September, to Argentina, but I will not consider it a vacation because, unless I come back to an unexpected fortune that allows me to quit my day job, I will not be able to "vacate" my employment. Instead, I look to make it a working vacation — not office work but lifework — no reason to suspend the rules, no reason to pretend I am living at a different pace in a different place, no reason to have re-entry problems when I return because I will not have been made lax by the trip. Vacations are often focused too much on forgetting ourselves. The puritan soul never wants to forget, it always wants to stay engaged. And so off we will go.

Digitizing Theater, Part II

(October 2009)

In May 2006 I wrote a Scene4 essay called "Digitizing Theatre," in which I mused about how playwrights and theatres might move forward into using web resources to promote theatrical work.

Three years later, the urgency is even more, well, urgent. Not only has the migration to the web on all fronts accelerated, it is where the future will be, and is, taking place. This is not BillGatesian hype but a hard reality: just ask any remaining working journalist today about where his or her publication is headed in order to survive, and it's not in putting more hard copies in self-serve bins on street corners.

This migration (isn't that an interesting phrase, with its redolence of refugees leaving a defunct place for one hopefully more funct) is not only dictated by economics but also shifting attention-span patterns based on the axiom of "don't make me think" (the title of Steve Krug's seminal book on web design).

At work we are debating about printing hard-copy program guides mailed out to school principals (i.e., very expensive old model) versus web-versions easily downloadable and web-pages scripted to be scanned rather than read (i.e., very inexpensive new model). No brainer, especially for a not-for-profit organization in parlous economic times.

In these discussions I have started using a phrase that describes my own experience in web-site visiting: "slurping" versus "sipping," that is, getting it all down quickly instead of doing the pondering review.

I have further argued to my boss and colleagues that "reading," in any sense that we of the "digital immigrants" strain of the population understand it, is largely absent from web-based presentations because of the poor resolutions of computer screens. Because the eyes scan a web page to select out information (the axiom, "don't make me think" also means "make it quick") the eyes and their attached brain essentially treat a web page as a slide show, though a clunky and static one, with the eyes doing the "sliding."

Instead of (or in addition to) having that all-important downloadable document (ah, how we of the Gutenberg generation love our portable reading material!), I'm arguing we need to make Flash presentations for all of the essential components of our programs — 2- to 3-minute stand-alone intros to

core principles and practices. And not talking-head presentations, either, but clever congloms of graphics, sound/music (which can include voiceover), Ken-Burnsish pan/zoom on still photos, and so on — in short, self-contained and tasty lozenges of information that use the easy delight of the visual presentation to slip in some substantive information.

Yes, they're little more than advertisements. Yes, they only worsen the situation of people not having enough patience to be patient with taking time to learn something. Yes, they are indispensible these days.

Here's how I know this.

We use iContact for our email blasts/newsletters. I had the charge of finding a company to do this service for us. I investigated 15 different companies, so I had a good exposure to the many ways companies offering a similar service market themselves in order to make their product stand out.

The thing that convinced me to go with iContact (in addition to the fact that they provide an easy-to-use system, excellent pricing for non-profits, and tech support people to whom I can talk either by phone or live chat) was their suite of video tutorials, catalogued by function and smoothly introductive in their content.

Spending 15 minutes watching five or six of these easy-to-digest presentations readied me to take on the tasks my boss wanted me to do in a way that wading through the word-based explanations on other sites never made me do.

In fact, when I came to a site that did not offer me a visual way to learn about what they offered, I tended to give it less regard, even if it might have offered me a better service. With the word-based sites I had to "think" in a way that distracted and bored me — I had to "winnow" on my own; with iContact, all I had to do was pay attention while the videos did the thinking — the winnowing — for me.

So what does all this mean for theatre, for my theatre?

I have embarked on my own limited effort to make my plays "web-abled." If I had world enough and time (and money), I would hire actors, have a rehearsal period, rent a space, do a three-camera set-up (with the right filming crew), run through the play, expertly edit it, and upload three minutes of it to YouTube.

But there is never world enough and time and money for this — and I'm not sure this would even be the right format.

So I have approached this from a different angle, using a few simple principles. First, any software I use I have to already own or obtain for free (that is, legitimately free, not by pirating something). Second, what I produce must only run two to three minutes in order to make it viewable on my website and on YouTube (and emailable). Third, it must have a visual "feel" to it, that is, crafted primarily as a movie, aware of the medium's language, requirements, process.

What I have begun to craft are, in essence, silent movies with sound effects (my version of the foley artists for radio theatre) and musical accompaniment.

For software, I use Microsoft PowerPoint as my starting point. (I'm using 2003, which I already have on my machine — I could also use, if I wanted to go all "free" software, Open Office's Impress.) I'm trying to learn Flash, but it's a bit of a slog, so PowerPoint becomes my workhorse at the moment. (There is much that can be done with PowerPoint if one knows how to mine its effects and transitions. It's clunky but workable.)

For raw material I use photos from past performances as well as the text of the scripts (with effects like fades, wipes, etc.) But I also use whatever material I can scrounge from Creative Commons (remember, "free"), especially for musical accompaniment and photos from Flickr. (I highly recommend Creative Commons, especially for the music.)

Once I've got the production done, I use iSpring Free, which converts PowerPoint's "ppt" file to a Flash "swf" file with an HTML page that can be uploaded to one's website or emailed. (iSpring offers a Pro version, but remember: legitimately free software, which iSpring is.) However, iSpring's SWF format cannot be converted into any other format, such as AVI or MP4, and it can't be uploaded to YouTube.

But I've got that base covered as well. Acoolsoft Software has a free program called PPT2YouTube that will convert PPT into MP4, the format YouTube likes.

So, I can get the original PowerPoint converted for my website and for YouTube for free. In order to edit music (mostly just do fade-in and fade-outs), I use the GNU GPL-licensed Audacity, which can work with MP3 files and also export the edited file as MP3 (with the proper add-on). (I use MP3 files whenever I can, and the music at Creative Commons is downloaded as MP3.)

And if I need to convert the MP4 file into some other format (AVI, WMV), or to a smaller format (say, from the 640x480 format for YouTube to 320x240), I use Super © (Simplified Universal Player Encoder & Renderer), another free program.

I don't have anything completed yet — at least completed enough to show. But I am having a whale of time doing this work because it forces me to re-think the "page to stage" tenet when the "stage" is a PowerPoint slide and I have to re-craft the material to fit the medium. It's exciting, in no small measure because I am learning about other aspects of my plays that weren't apparent to me when the words squatted inert in ordered sentences.

In my 2006 essay, I tried to address what some might believe would be lost in a transformative process like this: the "liveness" of live theatre. Here's what I said then, and I think it still applies three years later:

> I agree that the "liveness" of theatre is its special hook, but that "liveness" does not necessarily come out of the fact that live bodies occupy the same darkened space at the same time. (Any of us can recall "live" performances that felt dead and inert.) "Liveness" inheres in the synaptic connections made between audience and performers by the machinery of the production — and as long as the machinery enables those connections to be made, then it doesn't matter what the machinery is: stage lights and memorized lines or digitized bits in a computer workstation or some combination of both (or many other things). The important thing is the "connect" — it's the connect that makes us feel the "live."
>
> Finding ways to get outside the usual parameters of theatre would also liberate playwrights from the tyranny of having to depend on the kindnesses of strangers to get a production. In a sense, playwrights have always had this option: save some money, rent a theatre, send out the invites, rehearse the piece, open the doors, pay off the debts, start saving money again. But finding new ways to digitize themselves as playwrights gives them more power to define for themselves how they can get their names and works out there. After all, it is about getting seen and heard, and if the usual route of petitioning the gatekeepers of artistic directors and festival managers fails to shake the fruit from the tree, then it's time to find new trees to shake.

If anyone out there is working in this way, I'd love to hear from you. Email me, and we'll talk shop.

The Color Line

(November 2009)

In October's issue, to illustrate the American "original sin" of slavery, Nathan Thomas told a heartwrenching, irony-laced story of two mid-19th century actors, a black man (Ira Aldridge) who couldn't make a living in his craft on the American stage and thus decamped to Europe, and a white man (Thomas Dartmouth Rice) who made a name for himself by creating, in blackface, the character of Jim Crow.

Thomas makes his point in a pointed way: "Consider: a black man left his country because he couldn't play for white audiences. A white man makes his fortune by playing a black man for white audiences. This is America in all of its amazing contradiction."

It is still America in all its amazing contradiction, even on October 7, 2009. On that day, I had a reading done of my full-length play *Ain't Ethiopia* by a theatre in New York, MultiStages (Lorca Peress, Artistic Director). Here's the précis of the play: "After whites lynch his wife, an African-American man goes to Spain in 1937 to fight Franco only to find that he must face down the home-town fascists who murdered her if his life, and his wife's death, is to mean anything."

Jesse Colton, the man who goes to Spain, escapes from the Mississippi delta where his life means nothing, to New York, where he falls in with the Harlem Division of the Communist Party and undergoes a political education that broadens and sharpens him. While in Spain, he connects with a Hemingway wanna-be, Dewey Moore, a friendship that begins in mistrust and ends in a covenant: when Jesse decides to return home to confront his wife's killers, knowing that his death will be the result, Dewey agrees to be his witness and bear the story and pictures to the wider world. In such rolls of the dice some sort of social justice might come forward.

No talk-back was scheduled, but I made the rounds of the audience because I wanted to hear the responses to a play where not only did the "hero" die but the hero was also a black man choosing to sacrifice himself, in an act of love for his murdered wife, as a way to make justice "stick" where it needed to stick most: in local hearts and local minds, where the global becomes local, the ideological turns personal.

As with all Bell curves, most of the comments clumped into the complimentary middle, but a few stood out, not so much because they opposed each other but

because they illustrated how the "background radiation" of Thomas' original sin still hisses through our cultural cosmos. A young African-American woman felt that handing off the mission of bringing Jesse's story to the wider world to a white reporter undercut the power of Jesse's act and implied that black people had to depend upon white people, yet again, to achieve the justice they deserve.

A few white audience members had a problem believing that a young man from the Mississippi delta would ever have had the intellect to understand the grand theories underscoring the Spanish civil war. As one woman put it to me in an email: "I also had trouble reconciling a mistreated Black (a man fighting oppression) with whole political philosophies; i.e., Communism, Anarchism, Fascism (in a country fighting oppression)…"

However, none of these same people seemed to have any problem with several of the white characters (who came from similar backgrounds) understanding the larger theories, including a Polish working-class dissident who revered the Communist Manifesto (and lost an eye in defending it), a proletarian Irish anarchist from Belfast, and a village of Spanish peasants. Why was such skepticism reserved just for Jesse?

Several other white people elevated Jesse's action into high-level moral principle, sloughing off its color to make it "universal." As one person put it, "Congratulations!! I was totally enthralled with your fascinating, impassioned, and eloquent antiwar play…I look forward to seeing it fully produced when someone somewhere has the good sense to see its timely relevance, it's generous heart, and poetic cry in the wilderness of this war ravaged world."

As much as I appreciated this encomium, *Ain't Ethiopia* is not an anti-war play — it's a play about a black man taking charge of his life in the best way he knows how.

I suppose all of this could simply be chalked up to the expected diversity of opinion and insight in a room filled with fifty arts-inclined people coming at the work from at least fifty different angles. And perhaps I've prejudiced my hearing by tuning it to a particular frequency instead of letting it be broad-spectrumed and agnostic.

But it is also true that even in this day and this age, with a black man's presence in the White House offering us all the chance to eradicate the original sin, that the original sin comes roaring back in the "tea parties" and Glenn Beck-

inspired rants and healthcare town hall meetings — and in lesser venues like play readings.

The woman who made the statement about the "mistreated Black" also said this: "As to your overall story, I felt you were rehashing old, well-documented issues. Nothing new here." I wish that she were right — but she's not. There is still a color divide — W.E.B. Du Bois' "color-line," stated way back in the ancient year of 1903 in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Jesse's sacrifice, and Dewey's report of it, still have a long way to go.

A Response to Les Marcott's, "The Trouble with Che"

(December 2009)

A decade ago I read an article by Patrick Symmes in *Harper's* about Colombia, which lead me to his book *Chasing Che* (which itself grew out of a 1997 Harper's article by Symmes about Che titled "Ten Thousand Revolutions: Through South America, In Search of Che Guevara"). Les Marcott's "The Trouble With Che" reminded me that I had written Symmes a letter in response to his book (a letter to which he never responded), and I offer that letter as a compilation of my own thoughts about Che.

One last comment. I've often felt that the "trouble" with Che is not Che but that his life does not fit into any of the binary narrative templates that our culture inserts into our brains about human behavior: good/evil, kind/cruel, faithful/faithless, and so on. As Jorge Castañeda's excellent biography, *Compañero*, points out, Che was a highly combustible alloy of mismatched impulses and rationalities, sometimes seeing things clearly, sometimes crippled by his blind spots, with more of the latter than the former coming in to play as he sought, late in his life, the more extreme edges of experience so that he wouldn't become domesticated and dulled. We have no flexible template for that sort of jury-rigged personality and thus default to making the kinds of moralistic judgments that don't allow us to simply sit in the presence of the biography and absorb it openly and leniently.

I both agree and disagree with Marcott's conclusion, that "he died uncharismatic and unpersuasive – a narcissist in fatigues [– and that we shouldn't] turn him into something he wasn't." Agree that by the time Bolivia happened, Che's way of being in the world had become historically irrelevant, but disagree that if we underline his cruelties and scurrilities we have somehow gotten him "right." We cannot hold the shuffled-off Che responsible for the (mis) use of his life(death)-story. Marcott is right when he says that there is a "blank canvas" upon which is projected our own limited views of the man; however, that canvas is not Che but our own self, and it's that story to which we should pay our best attention.

* * * * *

Dear Mr. Symmes:

I had the pleasure of reading your recent article in *Harper's* about Colombia, which led me to your book, *Chasing Che*. I was especially interested in the book about Che since, as a playwright, I have been turning over in my mind for quite some time a variety of ideas about how to create a theatre piece about Che. The problem I run into, as you did, is how hard, if not impossible, it is to separate "the man" (whoever that might be) from the image barnacled with history, self-interest, mythology, and afflatus. A play about Che is also a play about Che or "Che" or Che! or however his life has been annotated and shaved.

In the end, you do chase Che and you do "complete" your search for the legend, but I also think that you do not "find" Che because you do not find in yourself what Che found in himself: some quality or wound that, to paraphrase you, made him "give a damn about the poor." Perhaps it was just accumulated fatigue over a 10,000-mile journey, but as the book progressed I noted an increasing antipathy towards the people you met and a growing frustration with "that place" noted as South America on modern maps but which also exists simultaneously in a multitude of pasts and presents that clash, grind, massacre, and occasionally fascinate.

In other words, while the overt text was a travelogue focused on Che, the subtext was really about how an American traveler responded to how foreign this world was to his American expectations. In short, the book ended up being about the kinds of things Che disliked about those who thought they could analyze and prescribe but who lacked an essential groundedness in what they were analyzing and prescribing. For instance, your lack of preparation for the trip may have been part of a carefree attitude of "let come what may," but it also indicated, at least to me, a lack of focus about what you were doing. To go where Che went is not just to go there geographically but also, as much as any human can, to map the spiritual topography onto your own bones so that you can try to see with eyes calibrated to a very different morality and spirituality. (I say this without knowing any of your preparations except for what is described in the book.)

Perhaps what made this kind of preparation hard was something else I sensed in your book: a lack of fit between Che's politics and your own, and not just on the extreme side of advocating revolution. You seemed to carry the standard (post)modern cynicism (or at least jaded caution) about any kind of utopian thinking, which you make clear throughout the book. (Your essay on Colombia was probably included in the issue of *Harper's* that it was because

that issue's thread was about utopias raised and dashed.) But without valuing the risk to reach the extremities of thought and action, one cannot follow Che at all in any visceral way. His way to achieve social justice may have been wrong and futile and historically limited, but the fact that he did it and died for it is what makes up a large part of his appeal (the Christ-like picture after his death and that haunting photo by Korda do not hurt, either). Most people will not go to the same lengths as Che, but they can admire someone who did (even as they deplore, in the same breath and perhaps with slight hypocrisy, the results of the extremism). And I find this kind of admiration missing in your book, which I think short-circuits your search for understanding.

In fact, I had a difficult time gleaning why you undertook the journey at all. To be sure, the project has an intrinsic appeal for a writer like yourself. But I did not get any sense of great joy or amplitude from you about your journey; I often sensed that you felt you had taken on a burden rather than a quest and were determined to see it through no matter what. I felt this most strongly at the end of the book, where it more or less peters out with the ceremony in Santa Clara, leaving this reader with the same sour taste that you felt standing at the field of trampled grass. It felt very much as if you wanted to just end the book, and so you just ended it.

But all in all I was glad to have read the book, and I especially thought the piece on Colombia was well-done, though unfortunately the people who need to read it will never read it. I look forward to your next work.

Sincerely,

Michael Bettencourt

2008

What is Art in 2008?

(January 2008)

My first impulse in writing about this topic for this issue of *Scene4* was to lay out an argument that relied on a metaphor of "verbing." It would work this way. Instead of trying to define the noun called "art" — that is, trying to capture some sort of "essence" — I instead wanted to concentrate on art as a verb, as "arting," efforts made by people to create something beyond the utilitarian and the instrumental, to create something special out of the coarseness of life.

In short, the usual aesthetic plea that art is something different from, or other than, "ordinary life."

But doing it that way feels a little embarrassing, actually, old-fashioned, even sort of geezerish, a special pleading nostalgic in its roots and intentions. And this reticence comes of recent reading of people like Richard Rorty, Umberto Eco, Michel Foucalt, Alain Badiou, Slavjov Žižek, Jean Baudrillard, Jean Nouvel, and many others — call them post-modernists or deconstructionists or post-post-modernists — the name doesn't matter. Despite the contradictions and controversies among these writers, they share one trait, and that is to see the world created by humans as contingent, predicated on chance, bare of certainties, shorn of essences, a battleground of interpretations some of which can be privileged only by the exercise of power and domination. There are no "better angels" in this world, only language shared about what the words "better" and "angels" might mean in a given historic context mediated by competing political and cultural interests.

My parents hate this sort of world because it takes away from them the self-importance of believing that their principles — and the holding of principled stands — are a bulwark against chaos. It steals from them a feeling the pride that comes from standing fast against the barbarians of relativism, greed, discourtesy, foul language, atheism, and the rest of the disintegrations ushered in by modernity. They see themselves as a kind of hero, standing up for standards, that is, for civilization.

I understand why they do this. They have, as the base for their intellectual and emotional lives, a sort of Platonism, the belief/hope that outside of or beyond the corruptions and delusions and mutability of the "real world," there is a "realer world" of unchanging guidelines for living that will outlast their

corruptible flesh, truths and truisms good for all times and places and available to anyone who cares to take the time to learn and practice them.

This is, of course, Christianity as filtered through modernity and capitalism and reduced to an adjective called "conservative" — this belief that there is a world beyond this one only visible to, and usable by, the elect. This is also a Christianity shorn of a concern for social justice and resistance to power — but that's a Platonism shared by the other side of the aisle, the progressives, who build their own wishful barricades against a different class of barbarians.

Now, having just said what I've said, I know it's dangerous to assert that "the world" is one way rather than another since any "way" seems to have no privilege of truth over any other "way." But here's how the world seems to me. I don't see any evidence of any Platonisms of any kind. In other words, if tomorrow — today — all human life disappeared, there would not exist in some noumenal realm a vault of collected principles that some other species, if it achieved its own version of human consciousness, could access and download.

It seems more likely to me that we simply make up whatever we need to believe whenever we need to believe it. Some of these made-up maxims take on weight through a connivance of history and power and thus acquire the feel of eternal solidity, but it's just a feel, and a "feel" is not evidence of anything except itself. (An aside: I'm always amazed at how people believe that if they feel strongly about something, then that something is real because they feel strongly about it — as if a strong feeling validates something other than itself and is the ultimate litmus test for authenticity.) Accepting that "time and chance happeneth to them all," as Ecclesiastes states, is not a comfortable option for most humans since it means accepting that life is pretty much a crap-shoot rather than something more exalted and purpose-driven.

But if life is a crap game, with the odds always in the house's favor, that fact doesn't mean we are powerless to do anything with the situation. (Notice I did not say "do anything about" the situation. Until we come to a point in our science where we can banish mortality, we cannot change our own demise, and our death is the only sure thing in an aleatory world.) We can choose a life of crime or justice, sloth or endless "projects," and so on and so on, the point being that we can narrate ourselves into any shape we want. In other words, we need other words to create an individual life — I would go so far as to say that each individual human life, outside of its biological creatureness, is a creation of language. Richard Rorty, in his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*," makes the

same point. We are the vocabularies we use. "Human nature" is a language game, and if the words stop, then we stop as well.

So what does this have to do with art in 2008? Just what it would have done in any other year. There are no Platonic "principles of art" out there somewhere that can be appealed to as tests or proofs of whether a particular artifact or activity is "artistic" and thus merits some level of heightened attention and praise (or blame) on our part. There are no cosmic apothegms about the "nature" and "purpose" of art which we can job in to settle a dispute or prove anything one way or another. There is only our "art-talk," and this art-talk is simply our deployment of vocabularies to justify and explain why something I personally like should be, or at least might be, liked by other people, just as "art" itself, as a human activity, is simply private obsessions made public with the hope that they will remain public, in the public eye and ear, for quite some time.

If art is just art-talk, then everything becomes art-talk's subject, making Brittany the equivalent of the Sistine chapel, and appealing to "standards" is just another vocabulary come out to play. And it doesn't matter which art-talk is applied, be it the commerce of an auction at Sotheby's or a personal blog on a sliver of the music world, since any art-talk is just as good or as bad as any other art-talk. In fact, "good" and "bad" are irrelevant terms — there is just the talk and your personal response to it, which can lead to more talk and still more.

Decline of civilization here? Surrender to the barbarians? A misguided melting-down of categorical boundaries? Maybe. Probably. But my take on the argument I've laid out is not that understanding art as art-talk flattens anything or devalues anything but shifts the focus from making distinctions that have no grounding in what, for lack of a better term, I'll call "fact" to an expansion of personal freedom to view the world and talk about it any way one feels moved to talk about it, and not have that talk subjected to a barrage of unsupportable critiques based on aesthetic "principles" that have no existence outside of their breathy intonations released by a human throat and mouth. I, for one, welcome anything that expands personal freedom, that is, the conditions that support and cherish continual self-creation, especially if that expansion comes at the expense of the outing of capital-T "Truth" as the chimera and alienator that it is.

This argument would drive my parents crazy, wedded as they are to the belief in "standards" and "principles" that exist outside of, and outlast, their own individual existences. Their rebuttals would include variations on the following: humans are beasts unless they are made to adhere to values that are cosmic

and eternal, such as those found in their own Catholicism (and "made to" is the operative phrase here); without defensible, and defended, distinctions, everything becomes flat and coarsened; older is better than newer and "the new"; humans cannot handle freedom and need to punished often to remind them of this. I cannot deny that some of what they say has weight — history provides them with some support — but in 2008, we cannot really reject — and do not really want to reject — the post-enlightenment, post-French Revolution, post-modern legacy of the freedom for individuals to realize their understandings of the world in ways they choose to live out those understandings with some large degree of private unrestraint.

So, the big question comes down to this: do we want freedom or do we want Truth (with that initial cap)? And, in terms of the subject of this essay, do we want art or do we want Art? Here is my art-talk about an answer. The old ways — canons, the Great Books, etc. — are gone as arbiters and reagents and measurements. This doesn't mean they don't have value, and their value as gatekeepers may come back around, as things often do, but at this historical moment, they exercise little or no power — in part because their power was always bogus, a matter of class interests, but also because fewer and fewer people know this history — certainly our schools don't do anything to promote it and keep it alive. So let's recognize that the old ways exist well off to the side of our cultural lives, possibly in an on-deck circle that has yet to come to bat but not currently in play.

This means that everything we consider "art" is now level with itself, that no standard is commonly accepted as a way to distinguish and rank. All there is, is talk, and more talk about that talk, and endless and instantaneous circulation of all this talk through the Internet, texting, and so on. As well as endless talk about how coarsening all this is, how commodifying of our human essence, and so on.

Now, we can hunger for Art and the mild but corrosive authoritarianism that comes with a thumbs-up or thumbs-down attitude at what passes by us in the human parade. Or we can be patient with this welter of vocabularies, pay attention to what is happening, and use what we learn to exercise our own freedom to (re)imagine ourselves into a continuous existence.

It is also important to remember that the art of any age — what an age, however defined, calls "art" — is always, in the words of Jean Nouvel, a majority of minor works. Our notion of "great art" is an anointment based on prejudice and self-interest and a certain amount of "magical thinking" about essences

and eternalities, which then gets solidified into institutions called museums and approved ways of seeing and responding called "aesthetics."

The truer truth about an age's art is that what moves, delights, prompts, dismays on a day-to-day basis are things that simply come and go — that make their entrances and exits and then wait around for a desperate Ph.D. student to find them for a dissertation. I have recently started to haunt YouTube and have been taken by how much of what is there is worth my time to watch. Most offerings would not be considered "great" by any canon's checklist, and, unless they become viral, will not have a long shelf-life. But at work is the freedom that digitalization has enabled — now everything can be sampled and recycled, low-cost technology has taken away the gatekeeper imposed by expensive equipment, social networks can reach millions in an instant. It doesn't matter if most of what is produced is not considered "art" by the doyens of culture (if such people even exist anymore) — the most important points, at least to me, are that people are making things rather than retreating into silence, and that others are both finding worth in the things getting made and moved to make their own things. What more could a culture want in order to maintain its vibrancy and survival? If technology permits anyone to get into the game — if technology allows anyone to become an "artist" — then the upshot is not that there will be no "real artists" but that people are turning their lives into a kind of art — they are "arting" themselves — and what could be wrong with that?

So, for art in 2008? May Web 2.0 continue its tentacular reach into every crevice in its search for connection and audience. May some of this urge towards private self-articulation find a mode of public expression that feeds into and nurtures political changes for greater justice, less suffering, an actual, rather than rhetorical, equality. May more children in their decrepit schools get more chances to make art, both as a way to give their voices an out and also to help them arm themselves against an adult world that seems to have little respect for them. May we simply keep moving forward in expanding and expanding our imaginative selves, building new vocabularies and new humanisms. If we use art to do this and more, then the "great art" of the age will be us — in reality, the only art-product really worth striving for.

Raising Consciousness

(February 2008)

On a playwright's listserv where I lurk, the contributors recently had a set-to about whether plays and playwrights should raise the consciousness of their audiences/readers. They skirmished and parried and feinted, with factions arguing yes and no, for and against, and so on and so on, but in essence, the argument broke two ways. The "yes" voters felt that art should somehow "raise" those who consume it, the "no" voters rejected such a "should" and counseled that the only maxim is "don't be boring." And then on to another topic.

I thought they all made a rather dramatic assumption in their arguments: that there is, in fact, something called a "consciousness" that can be raised. I am not so sure.

How can I not be sure, you may ask, when the forward edge of neuroscience is now plumbing the chemistry and physics of how the body knows itself and the world around it? How can I not be sure when philosophers and other thinkers have generated so much thinking about thinking, so much thought about thought?

But I am unsure, and while I can offer no "evidence" to prove my proposition, I can offer a redefinition, and thus a reconsideration, of the term "consciousness" to get at what I mean.

Rather than act as if the word has a universal meaning for all time — i.e., that it is the thing that provides us truth and humanity, the thing that divides us from animals, that makes substance sentient, etc. — I ask this instead: what is "consciousness" in a hyper-virtualized capitalist system like the one in which we live today?

And my only answer is: it is akin to a dream, and we live in that dream, with so much, if not all, of it mediated, prepared, shaped by corporate forces about which we (choose to) know little and over which we have no control.

These speculations remind me of something a friend once said to me. He felt the reason why it was so easy to hypnotize people was because they were already almost asleep. It didn't take much to push them into an actual dream-state. All we need to do is think about the hypnotics offered by our society, from video games to consumerism, and the resultant political apathy and quietism, and it doesn't take much to see that what he said has some weight to it.

This does not mean that *awareness* cannot be raised. All creatures have awareness, a "knowing" about the world that surrounds them, though given the multitude of neurological set-ups for this, none of these "awarenesses" have an equivalence. We will never know the world the way even the simplest cellular mechanism does, except, of course, through the vocabularies we've invented to make our metaphors palpable, like science or art. But this is experience from the side, so to speak, not by direct infusion — an imaginative reconstruction that approaches, but can never reach, the zero point of the direct and unmediated "experience of."

But humans can raise *human* awareness, it can be done fairly easily, and many plays try to do just this, "awareness" meaning, primarily, "giving the audience member more information about," a type of entertainment journalism or documentarianism crafted to "put us in the place of" in order to prime empathy, a kind of emotional/aesthetic border-crossing.

But raising consciousness — that is a different matter altogether. "Raising consciousness" is not, like raising awareness, a process of familiarizing but of what the Russian formalist critic ViktorShklovsky called "enstrangement." In his *Theory of Prose*, he cast the human struggle for consciousness in the modern world as a struggle between enstrangement and "automatization." To him, "automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war." As it does this, alienation results (what, above, I call hypnosis) and, paradoxically, only enstrangement can re-familiarize people with themselves.

So, given the debate topic on the listserv — should theatre raise consciousness? — what would have been my contribution if I had contributed, given all these thoughts?

I think most theatre serves to reinforce and renew the sleep we are in. Even when it moves us, it is the kind of movement we have when we jerk in our sleep — a response to a dream state. Even theatre that purports to rip away the veil doesn't challenge this sleep we're in — it just roils it a bit more than usual.

In short, if we are so asleep, how can any consciousness be raised? Raised to what? To do what? What would a "raised consciousness," one supposedly so enstranged that it gained some power to look outside itself at the roots of its own limitations, act like in our hyper-virtual capitalized society? And how would we know a "raised consciousness" if we came across it and it came across us?

I am sure there are good counterarguments here — I just don't have any myself. I'll be glad to entertain anything anyone has to say on the topic. So, please, start blogging.

Dance

(March 2008)

My good friend Elfin and I recently collaborated on a theatre piece that involved having the actors move/dance as they spoke their lines — an Anne Bogart kind of thing — and I found myself working with the actors on their movements — in essence, choreographing — because, a quarter century ago, I was actually a dancer: performer, teacher, choreographer. Yes, another life completely.

At the less than supple age of 29, about fifteen years past the time I should have started and at an age when most male dancers are hitting their prime, I took up dancing. This wasn't an entirely serendipitous decision. I had had some premonitions as far back as fifth grade, from the neatest teacher in the universe: Miss Ziegler. She looked a little like Sally Field, but wore her blond hair bobbed, almost F. Scott Fitzgeraldian in shortness. At the end of the day she would often drag out a scratched Yamaha nylon-stringed guitar and drag us out of our itchy self-consciousness long enough to sing songs.

One day, rainy, in the interregnum between Thanksgiving and Christmas, she wheeled in a movie projector. We hadn't had a movie in a while, and she hadn't mentioned this all week, so we grudgingly transformed a bit of our early winter torpor into interest. She turned the lights off.

A few frames with numbers (of course we counted down out loud), then a brief bit of leader, then a title, with a blast of symphonic music behind it: "The Magic of Dance." A bunch of us groaned. She, for her part, kept cool and let the movie run.

I have only the sketchiest memory now about what the narrator, Edward Villella, first said; which came first — the pictures of the New York City Ballet in class or in performance; whether he began or ended with a rendition of *Giselle*. But I do remember that what Villella said spoke powerfully to a part of me that thrilled to this fusion of idea and body, to the possibility that something as nebulous and irritating as an idea (which I'd only just begun to create with any certainty) could shape space and time into something as solid as an afternoon snack.

I can recall even now Villella arcing through the air in a ballistic grand jeté that seemed to take forever to complete; his Apollo, the soft lines of his white costume clinging to his robust body, his pirouettes sharp, unerring, his

hand gestures languid, fluent, tight. And he said something which I have never forgotten (and I'm still amazed that my eleven-year old brain retained it at all): "In dance, total freedom comes from total control." I watched the movie again after school while Miss Ziegler sat and did papers.

But where I grew up boys didn't dance, and it wasn't until college that dance and I met again, in a series of musicals (the usual suspects: *Guys and Dolls*, *West Side Story*, *Applause*). I liked the discipline and clannishness of dance and the dancers. Our choreographer would always have us come early for a short class, and I got my first exposure to the French of the classroom and the length tendons will (and will not) stretch in a développé or a forward port de bras in fourth position. I felt privileged in doing this, imbued with seriousness, slightly bohemian or gypsy and therefore special, selected. We dressed for rehearsal in the rattiest clothes we could find, our commitment measured in inverse ratio to how torn our torn leg warmers were or how loosely our sweatshirts hung on us. (This is a trait I've noticed among dancers, who seem to lug around an endless wardrobe of deshabille to offset the formality of their training.) I pursued dancing for a little bit in graduate school, even thought about going to New York. But, as with many things, it just never happened for a variety of perfectly good, and perfectly lame, excuses.

So why take it up again at twenty-nine? Because twenty-nine bordered thirty. At the time thirty years old loomed as an ominous fulcrum. Balancing the seven years I'd spent since graduate school crafting a professional self was the not-quite-tamed desire to move in a world wider than just salary and retirement planning. Which side would teeter up to the light, which side drop to darkness? I had no doubt about the answer.

So I started taking ballet classes every day, sometimes with adults at night, sometimes with the after-school crowd in the afternoon. (Picture a stocky youngish balding man in black tights among flocks of girls with pink shoes and tendons as pliable as warm licorice.) Soon I started taking two classes a day, and then branched into jazz and modern, sometimes even going to classes on Saturday mornings (often well before my body awoke).

I was teaching at a private school at the time, and I convinced the administration to let me teach dance as my coaching requirement. So I taught ballet and modern and jazz, and I choreographed pieces for the students' spring dance concert. I also started doing some performances with local dance companies as well as choreographing — and before I knew it I was a dancer.

True, fifteen years late and destined not to go much beyond where I spun and stretched. But I danced; I had become a dancer. I followed this regimen for two years, to the age of 31, before a number of things convinced me to move on.

In looking for a way to describe the flow and filigree of dance, the best metaphor is quantum physics, with its elements of space, time, uncertainty, and motion, and informing all these, energy.

Einstein showed that despite our commonsense notions, space is not empty emptiness but instead is a substance shaped by the bodies occupying it, and shaping those bodies in return. Dancers whittle this space with their bodies, carving out the universe moment by moment, movement by movement, mimicking the jig of quarks and the orbital reel of the planets. A vocabulary of rules reins in each of Einstein's choreographies: electromagnetism, the weak and strong forces — and for dancers, gravity, the master choreographer that they must always obey.

But far from restricting the dancer's creativity, gravity gives it latitude and resilience because only through that obedience — Villella's "freedom through control" — can dancers transform gravity's clinch into a beauty that makes luminous the grace and mystery that attends each moment and each breath of our lives. The dancer's translation of gravity confirms what we already know: all life moves as a choreography of intricate attractions as intimate as skin and as glorious as the fractal beauty of the cosmos.

Aside from, or in addition to, this more aesthetic education, though, I learned a lot about what it means to be a man (portentous comment, no?). Certain things did not come easily to a 29-year old body trained in football and basketball, with heavy thighs and an upper chest like a weightlifter's. I was invariably the only male in class and was always chagrined by the seemingly tendonless stretch of young, pink-glowing bodies. When they slid gracefully into full splits like a pair of shears in a tailor's hand, I made a shallow V. Where they rippled their arms like the breathy sweep of a second hand on an expensive watch, my arms ratcheted around like the arthritic second hand on those clunky old school clocks. Where they pulled like taffy, I was hard candy; where they skimmed and flitted, I waded.

Naturally there came a time, after several months of this disciplined exposure of my body's dirty laundry, when I had to seriously get in touch with why I had decided to punish myself this way. I'm sure this time comes to all dancers, and all artists, but I think it comes with a special poignancy to an older dancer who wishes he were a younger dancer. My failure to be even an unreasonable

facsimile of Nureyev was rusting the joints of any self-worth that might have been loitering around for an encouraging pat on the head. It was not a very nice rack I had stretched myself on.

What a crucial moment that was, in both senses of "crucial."I had tasted failure, or so it seemed. Not all the good will in the world was going to give me full turnout. I'd believed, naively, that my noble acceptance of the challenge would have somehow automatically transformed me; but the only automatic thing was Terpsichore's indifference to my good intentions. I was angry, and the anger threatened to make any progress or enjoyment of dance impossible. It was a kind of wood alcohol and I was being blinded by drinking it.

As I said before, I think anyone who wants to be an artist goes through this coronation of failure; it's not particularly novel or interesting. What is interesting is how I had to change to accommodate these new images of myself as a naked failure. I had reacted to my insufficiencies in typical male fashion: I was going to give myself no loving quarter, no time off for good behavior. Which told me much about how men do, and don't, endure. Men endure best, will go through forests of pain and privation, when they're reasonably assured that they'll gain some profits from their efforts. The body, then, is an instrument that should tolerate no weakness nor exhibit any hesitation. Men are not good long-haul people for the most part because their intimacy with their bodies is often purely contractual, like stabling a thoroughbred to earn money at the races.

Dancing had broken that contract of denial and forced me to see "me" in a very startling new light. If I was going to dance, I couldn't use my body like a racehorse until it dropped dead in its tracks. I had to nurture this hunk of flesh, pamper it with patient regard and tender congratulations. If I continued to use is as a machine, I could only expect that anger at it one feels when a machine gives in to entropy.

But that was not all. Mind and body became more integrated. The defense/prosecutor coalition I'd been using to judge myself gave way to a gossipy quilting bee. And suddenly (though it took a while for that "suddenly" to bloom), I understood more clearly what women had understood for a long time, what Steinbeck has Ma Joad say in *The Grapes of Wrath*: "Man, he lives in jerks.... Woman, it's all one flow, a stream...[that] goes right on." I had wanted to jerk my body over the threshold of ignorance into the honeymoon of accomplishment, forgetting all the tiny marriages and truces along the way that would knot mind

and body, idea and expression, into a strong, durable, accomplished state of being.

I'm not speaking here as if this is the way men and women *really* are; this was dance, after all, not real life. All I mean is that in the process of becoming an artist, I had to recognize and make use of certain traits that have been, rightly or wrongly, designated feminine, such as softness and delicacy of movement and expression, as well as treat my body much more "femininely," as an integrated partnership between muscle and mind, not as an anxious truce with each distrusting each. The more I danced, the more I described and thought of myself as a *dancer*, the less I was able to think of myself as a male, a man, a masculine creature. I was a better dancer for the balance; I was a dancer because of the balance.

I never did go to New York, of course. I choreographed for local groups, took classes when I could, performed a few more times — and then moved on to other things. But I'm glad I took the challenge, even though I never got noticed by Arlene Croce or courted by Peter Martins, because it showed me that becoming a person and an artist is much more interesting and curious — "curiouser and curiouser" as time goes on — than being neatly enwrapped by the cartouche of "man" and thus made to play a game of limits.

Frame

(April 2008)

All right, this assay will probably turn out boring and didactic, and it doesn't have an organic connection to theatre, which I try to keep as the standard through-line of all my essays, but what follows has been on my mind for many months, and I am just acting as the message's messenger.

March 19 signals the fifth anniversary of the Iraq war (if "anniversary" can be used to describe a half-decade of mayhem). Yet who would know this date by watching the "content" streamed from the infotainment cosmos? My wife, the Marvelous Maria Beatriz, and I have now taken to adding a tagline to anything stupid we happen to see on the television, or in any medium (which means we're adding it very often): "And we are at war." This pronouncement is our way of sending out a small sound-wave of reminding to a society that seems, even in the midst of a coming economic downturn, bent on amusing itself to death and avoiding anything like mature, adult, rational behavior. (Even the recent bombing of the of the military recruitment center in Times Square couldn't provoke a public discussion about the war, and the never-ending fable-making called our presidential selection process treats the war as a second-tier discussion topic.)

"Amusing itself to death" is not my phrase but comes from Neil Postman's superb 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, a must-read that scarcely shows any datedness even though it's almost a quarter century old. (Factoid: Roger Waters of Pink Floyd fame made an album "Amused to Death" in 1992 based on Postman's book.) One of Postman's points is that, having been drenched for decades in televisual communication, which must reduce all ideas to the lower bandwidth of entertainment, we no longer care to, or know how to, engage in rational argument and complex thinking. Though he focused primarily on television, because our current universe of small screens (phones, iPod video, etc.) didn't exist then, his point still holds since these new small-screen venues are just bastard offshoot species of the television.

So what happens when the fifth anniversary of a war arrives (even heralded by a bomb blast) in a culture tutored on entertainment and non-rational, non-linear modes of processing information? Nothing. Such is the pitiable state of our democracy and our ability to act as citizens.

But to stop here and go round and round like a carousel kvetching and mourning misses the point because this state of being did not arrive by accident or flower because of inherent faults in "human nature" or happen because of some divine fate. This condition exists as the outgrowth of a particular historical form of capitalism resolving its internal and external pressures, sometimes knowingly, sometimes not, but, like gravity (or, perhaps more fitting, pulsing dark matter), always there, exerting its push and pull.

Without that capitalist frame of reference, without understanding how the specific historically based capitalist pressures ooze into and shape everything in our culture, from the most private religious experience to imperialist acts of war, then we roam around in a fog, unable to understand the things that mold our selves and spark why we do what we do. And the only way to gain this understanding — to banish the fog — comes through study, argument, writing, reason — in short, through a return to the 18th and 19th centuries, when the written word and its corollary in rational argument were the only Internet available.

Sound Marxist-like? Yes, of course, if by "Marxist" one means an analytical approach that focuses on historical, contingent explanations for the current state of affairs rather than appeals to spirit, "human nature," and other bogus essentializings. But also "Marxist" in locating the discontents of civilization in the economic imperatives that sculpt social relations coupled with a moral charge to bring peace and justice to a system based on violence and exploitation (what Richard Rorty noted as reducing the cruelty in our lives).

So, why so little news of war in a society that's been prosecuting a war for five years and, instead, the constant call to download this and that entertainment item to whatever small screen or ear-budded music player one happens to command — in other words, why such a societal urging to make one's field of view so physically and intellectually narrow (small screen, private concert) instead of an opposite insistence to broaden out and become intimate with the whole world? Whatever the answer to this "why?", it needs to be rigged on this capitalist frame because we are all the spawn of this system, like it or not, and the first order of business in escaping from one's parents is to know them.

But will the people answer this "why"? I don't hold out much hope for this happening, at least not in any cumulative society-wide way, because crafting an answer requires a lot of uncomfortable work in the company of others with little guarantee of a supportive payoff, and that mode of self-discipline, self-regard,

and self-sharing has been killed off several times over in our society. This society no longer seems to know how to nurture a "citizen mentality," which must carry this regenerative paradox in its heart: an almost irrational commitment to the power of rational argument, a faith that employing a historical, materialist non-faith-based view of human society can convince people to change their lives, an unskeptical acceptance of skepticism's ability to clear the motes from one's eyes.

The system in which we live is rapidly disappearing this way of thinking about the world and our place in it — it's not in any of our educative systems, be it school, art, or politics, which means it's certainly not in our children. Replacing it is a mindset that information must be "entertainmentized," that value means money, that the private trumps the universal. That's how we can fight a war for five years and still have the infotainment buttered across our newspapers and magazines and websites and television by the corporations that command our lives, our fortunes, and our destinies.

In the introduction to his book, Postman compares the dystopias created by George Orwell in *1984* and Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*. As he points out, Orwell believed our enslavement would come from totalitarian oppressors inflicting pain, but Huxley believed the opposite: that our enslavement would come from the oppressors inflicting pleasure: "In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us." In the end, under the current capitalist regime that authorizes our lives, Huxley got it right.

Eros on the Escalator

(May 2008)

Drama — theatre — can happen — often happens best — in the oddest venues.

At one of the subway stations where I catch my train to work, a very long escalator carries passengers on a meditative glide from the toll booth to the train platform and back. During the morning rush hour, most riders (including myself at times) don't really "ride" the escalator but instead diligently scurry down it, impatient to get to the bottom so that we can ready ourselves to ooze into the train when it clatters to a halt and the doors open and close like scissors cutting us into strings of bland silhouettes. We herd along like nervous little drones.

But occasionally, just to defy the morning's momentum, I actually ride the escalator down, and it's then that I sometimes receive one of those gratuities that make life in this city worthwhile: I fall in love — briefly, safely, tinged with the sharp cocaine of innocence and a full license for dreaming.

Because as I ride I take the time to watch the contra-flow of people coming up, and often among them is a person who makes my heart yammer and my skin squeeze. The person may not be classically lovely, may not always be a woman — but something about this person sweetens the eye the way excellent chocolate or the acid sugar burr of a balanced lemonade suddenly turns taste into rapture.

Usually our eyes don't connect, which is fine — the visual gift of the person's person, given and taken away by the opposite flow of the escalator, shakes color out of the bland usual, which is gift enough on most days.

But sometimes we do connect, and one of two things happens — either the person looks away, genuinely uninterested or slightly embarrassed or dulled by preoccupation, or a flirt blossoms, an ephemeral slip of lightly tinged erotic permission, where the eyes connect like kite and wind and the face relaxes, caught in the bowl of the lips curving upward in a smile. The flirt never lasts longer than the time it take to pass each other by — any longer, and it would require action, decision, commitment, detail. But in that convective moment boundaries get erased, pleasure engaged, fantasy revved, and the mundane clank of the metal stairs is the sound of the ship's retracting anchor freeing the vessel into the wind.

Haven't you ever felt this momentary pang which is both sexual and something other than sexual, where the fair face or hard body on some slant path that crosses yours makes your nerve endings fizz, makes you breathe in sharply enough to bring your skin to red-alert? It's sexual because the physical response to the person coming my way is the purest distillate of lust. I don't want to know names and histories and things that would require discrimination and therefore etiquette. Instead, I want to shuck off all rules and restraints with my clothes, paying homage to nothing but sensation — and then leave, carrying nothing more with me than sensation's aftermath, selfish and sated. Union without an address and phone number.

But that something other than sexual — much more complicated. When that face accosts me and my body flushes and my mouth runs dry and I imagine flesh rubbing the sulfur of flesh into flame, something else also gets added, like copper filings that turn a fireplace flame green, straightforward carnality distracted into beauty. The sexual makes the flesh magnetic, the slap and dash of coupling, but the erotic restrains the gluttony, wants to extend the pleasure of the pleasure. If the sexual involves the high arc of climax with the inevitable little death that comes afterwards, then the erotic meets a full hunger with a full meal several courses long, each sense simmered open along a gentler curve.

This erotic is difficult to put into words because it works best wordless. In a book I once read about eroticism and property, the author talked about how economics treats objects as things composed of material physics and only good for exchange. But when that same object becomes the focus of erotic appreciation, becomes a thing of love rather than lucre, the owner infuses the object with self, as if the body's capillary system extended itself to the object, feeding it oxygen, bringing it into orbit. Making property erotic meant bringing it out of the anonymity of physics and naming it, making it domestic. In fact, as Norman O. Brown pointed out, the whole basis for what we would call "life" (not just biology but everything we mean when we name ourselves human) is built on a substrate of eros, of love, play, pleasure, that childish permeability of boundaries which Freud called "polymorphously perverse." Only as the ego and superego take over their conservative roles does the original free-wheeling eros gets whittled down into the reality-principle, into economics and exchange, the sobriety of reason, the genitalia of sex, and the dronish little scuttle from the tool booth to the train platform.

So what does this mean for the flirt on the escalator? A satisfying flirt has both qualities to it, the sexual jump-the-bones desire and the erotic linger, materiality and spirit, haggle and invitation, attraction and beauty. With only the sexual, the flirt becomes lechery; with only the erotic, it becomes just ghostly appreciation, like museum-going. With both, the flirt pushes the blood to high tide and gives the mind ballast. So when that singular face or body reaches out of the flow and hooks me, as I pass by and feel that double flush, I carry away the little bit more of life that the flirt gives me, no sure antidote against the ravages but enough to lighten and lift, to erase any of the routine growing its scales on me. Such flirts widen the moments and help me wear my mortality with something like comfort.

And the day will tender endless opportunities: as I move through my day, I will meet scores on the sly, my heart saluting them, my eyes dancing, rarefied for a moment by the dark hair framing a face or the tight swash of denim across solid legs. Such (a) play makes promises it can keep.

Jigging and Reeling

(June 2008)

Perhaps such a situation does not arrive in every artist's life, but I would bet that it does, in some key, major or minor, at some length, brief or protracted: that situation of wondering just what living as an artist means.For me, right now, this situation frames itself this way: after a decade of dedicated playwriting without quite reaching a (to me) satisfying zenith, why continue to do it?

In my past, when faced with this question, I always quit what I was doing to start something else, figuring that the "failure" of that particular "career" signaled taking just such an action: my unmet expectations as an indicator of the road I "should not" have taken as well as a signpost for the road I "should" take, now that I have had my vision "corrected" by reality. (Note the ironic quotation marks.)

In short, I have often been an unreliable lover to my muses.

But with writing plays and screenplays — I can't do that. I can't give up on Melpomene. She has hooked me deep -- no getting off that line. So what do I do while I wait for her to reel me back in?

I have been trying to live an artistic life rather than practice an art.

Exhibit 1: Irish step-dancing. I don't know why, but I don't argue with my solar plexus: let me watch the video of Riverdance, and I tear up at the opening number as the dancers ram the floor with their metalled shoes at the same time they float above their percussions. I think what resounds in me with the dancing, and what reveals something about the ethic that gives me spine while I walk through the world, comes from this art form's self-decision to limit the creative energy with pattern and stricture in order to free it for expression and delight. I liken it a swan gliding through the water: all s-curved neck and folded wings an image of majesty at rest while below the water line, below sight-level, the feet pump like mad. Self-governance married to wild exertion.

So I now take an Irish beginner's step-dancing class at the Irish Arts Center here in New York. First observation: an art form better suited to young ankles and Achilles tendons. Second observation: aerobic to just beyond my lungs' capacities. Third observation: delight every Monday at 7 p.m. Fourteen of us bounce in jigs and reels, our upper bodies rigor'd, our legs paddle-wheeling,

none of us expecting to audition for the traveling cast of Riverdance yet still there because we enjoy the challenge of making our bodies resist gravity's claw.

For me, the class drags me off my head-stage, exits me from the word-welter and shuts off the mind-chatter by making me focus on the forgotten fundaments of sucking down oxygen and wielding the thingness of my corpus through, and against, the world. In short, it refreshens me by stripping away the over-importanced tics of my oh-so-New-York-life and narrowing the moment down to one body moving in space on musical time.

Exhibit 2: Celtic harp. Well, since I go to the Center one night a week, why not make it two, and so on Wednesdays I sit with a 26-string harp between my legs and thrum out "My Bonnie Lies Over The Ocean," "Barbara Allen," and other folky chestnuts. Again, a straight-forwardness about the instrument and the playing of -- tuned to the untricky key of C, and two hands, nylon strings, and sounding board all held in a lover-like embrace.

Even simple scales sound the way delicious tastes.

And while I have to read notes and transfer that sight to fingers-on-strings -- the cognitive part -- the playing itself, like the step-dancing, relies on making the body memorize patterns. Hands must shape and ready themselves on the strings ahead of playing the notes they will play -- something like the swan's feet -- while the music sine-waves through the air. The hands must take the shape of memories of shapes, just as the step-dancer, rather than making steps, must body in his or her body the patterns of a reel or a light jig. The hands (and the brain cabled to them) can't think the notes into a music, just as the body can't think the steps into a dance -- the music and the movements come through memory rising like yeast and a refreshing relief from thinking.

So, the best way right now for me to get back to my writing seems a path made out of other arts that, in their ministrations, de-barnacle the brain, leaven the body, and fumigate the spirit. In essence, spring-cleaning.

Now, if I can only figure out a way to play the harp while doing the first step of the reel....

Playwrights' Forum: A Real Forum for Playwrights

(July 2008)

Three years ago, I spent a wonderful weekend in Memphis, Tennessee, with Playwrights' Forum, a producing organization putting on my full-length play *A Question of Color*, about an illegal interracial marriage in North Carolina in 1907 (based on the memoir of the same name by Sara Smith Beattie). Four years before that, they produced *Dancing At The Revolution*, about Emma Goldman's two years in federal prison. Not an easy script to do, technically, and it opened on August 16, the anniversary of Elvis' death and the start of what locals call "Dead Elvis Weekend." But we managed to survive and sell out the run.

And once again, Playwrights' Forum and I have connected with the just-concluded run of *Hardball*, what I affectionately call my "Jewish baseball player play," because that is, in fact, what it is about. Created with Dean Kaner and Bob Ozasky, *Hardball* is grounded in the story of Dean Kaner's grandfather, Henry Kaner. At the age of 22, in 1922, Henry was a minor-league pitching phenomenon in Superior, Wisconsin. He was offered a chance to play in the majors for the St. Louis Browns, but if the took the offer, more than likely he would have to play on Shabbos. Which he decided not to do, opting instead to take up the middle-class life of a salesman.

I want to use this space, as I did on both of those previous occasions, to thank the volunteer staff and board members, as well as all the directors and cast members with whom I've worked, for making Playwrights' Forum the gutsy, tenacious, and gracious organization it is. And "gutsy" is the right word, because Playwrights' Forum takes on an incredibly risky enterprise in the "theatre community": producing entire seasons of unknown work by unknown playwrights.

That is correct: producing. Not an offer of self-producing (you get everybody and everything, we'll let you use our space and we'll do some marketing), not the starved offer of a script-in-hand reading, not the almost-there-I-can-taste-it breadcrumb of a workshop -- but full production: "overture, hit the lights, this is it, the night of nights / no more rehearsing and nursing a part...."

They have taken chances with me because it is their reason for being to take chances, and I wish I had more than kudos to use to repay them for their generosity and faith. But kudos I can offer, so hats off again to Playwrights' Forum for their courageous mission to give unknown playwrights and their unknown but

eager-to-be-seen plays what they really need: three dimensions embedded in the fourth dimension of time and the fifth dimension of camaraderie and bravery.

Sociable Contract

(August 2008)

As a wordsmith I both hate and love it when reality casually throws up a phrase for which I would have given my gold crown to fashion. (Of course, this state of flummox doesn't stop me from using it as soon as possible, with the added benefit that I don't have to footnote it.) This happened the other day as I talked with a man updating the insurance map of the property where I work. He had to catalogue on the map any changes he found so that the company could know what its policy covered.

He explained to me, in more detail than I wanted, the importance of keeping tabs on how a property gets used, and used not just by the owner. "For instance," he pointed out, "if people come through a hole in the fence at the back of the property and cross the parking lot to get to the street, and that goes on long enough, you've got an easement, even if you don't have an official one on the map." The industry had a name for this phenomenon, and here the man unknowingly spoke poetry: "Ripening shades of title."

What a deliciously accurate phrase! Let it mull in the mouth for a moment, like a bite of just-ripe Bosc pear, and then taste its truth. What better captures the dynamic process of evolving into a human being -- that we become more human as our "shades of title," the claims we have upon each other as a consequence of being born, "ripen" into a sweeter empathy for one another.

But am I simply being carried away by felicity into believing something that isn't true, that is just another sloppy sentiment, like "We Are The World"? Let's test it. As I sit alone at my word processor, one thing is patently clear: I am not alone. The Marvelous Maria-Beatriz futzes in the kitchen; the traffic slurs on by. A block away people stream by in their cars or run to catch the 123 bus, But even if I were ensconced on the highest mountain, I would not be alone because physical proximity is not the issue. I or any of us can exist only if we are embedded in a thick matrix of human invention. Whether I like it or not, the quality of my life depends upon the company and kindnesses of strangers.

Which leads me to another truth: Everything I do, and everything everybody does, has a consequence, either helpful or harmful, for someone else. Think of this as the difference between a mosaic and an automatic transmission. As one of the tiles in a mosaic, I am certainly not alone; I have all my fellow tiles around me. Yet I am stuck; I can't even know what's happening five or six tiles over.

The mosaic is a passive system. In an automatic transmission, though, motion creates changes through hydraulics; in the same way, human society, through its own labyrinthine system of pressures and responses, creates constant flux and morphing. These shifts, in turn, evolve "title," by the simple fact that no one is unaffected by what anyone else does. We have claims upon each other's existence whether there are six or six thousand degrees of separation.

Then there are the "shades." Like any color scheme, the "shades of title" run from dark to light. Nothing says that the claims people have upon each other must nourish or preserve. Nor does "ripening" always lead to the dusky glow of a full-juiced peach. In many places, for instance, the shades of title there are decidedly dark, and the ripening of these claims has led to genocide. Such infernal growth is not theirs alone — the world sometimes seems over-ripe with deadly claims.

But one thing is clear in looking at the this infernal garden: no one really wants a world like this. The actions of its players may fall within the category of "human" because they are done by humans, but morally, most people condemn them as "inhuman." What does that mean? It means that what many consider essentially human, as opposed to a simple categorization of human actions, takes on a different shade of title, one tilted toward compassion, responsibility, recognition of common aims and aspirations. And to "ripen" into this kind of human being requires effort, self-discipline, study, humility, a sense of humor, reduced ego — it is an acquired state, not one that comes naturally.

I suppose that a good society, one concerned about the shades of title each has upon each, would nourish that kind of ripening, that we all have "ripening shades of title" to each other, ties that bind even the remotest Inuit to the Namibian village elder. Or, more locally, that connect a carful of subway riders on a Friday morning heading into Columbus Circle to each other, no matter how much they avoid eye- and body-contact and shuffle along as if they are floating islands unconnected to the main.

Ripening means evolving. This our sole task as human beings; otherwise, nothing can really mean anything worthwhile.

Dogme (fill in the year)

(September 2008)

In 1995, Danish directors Lars van Trier and Thomas Vinterberg (later joined by Kristian Levring and Søren Kragh-Jacobsen) issued the manifesto known as Dogme95, an attempt to "purify" filmmaking by doing away with gimmicks and special effects. Embedded in the Manifesto was a "Vow of Chastity," 10 guidelines for purification, such as "filming must be done on location," and "the sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa."

Like most manifestoes, this one was ignored, debated, breached (by Vinterberg himself, when he confessed in *The Celebration* to having covered a window in one scene, thus introducing special lighting), and parodied (check out Dogpile95's website).

But also like most manifestoes, underneath the rhetoric and cheek it identifies a core artistic problem in cinema: how to make movies something other than just a financial exchange with an audience member, how the filmmaker can, in the words of the Vow, "force the truth out of [the] characters and settings… by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations." One can argue about Dogme95's aims, means, and the films made under its guidance, but that person would be hard-pressed to deny that movies today, by and large, hardly try to force the truth out of anything in fear of having a low box-office return on opening weekend.

Theatre has its own need for purification, though the divide is different here than it is for cinema. Lately I've been seeing and reviewing a lot of what would be deemed "experimental theatre," and some of it has been very interesting. For instance, I recently saw *Frequency Hopping*, which details the remarkable friendship, in 1940, between the actress Hedy Lamarr and the composer George Antheil (who is best known for his "Ballet Mécanique"). Together they came up with a way to jam radar-guided torpedoes (yes, it's true!) by shifting frequencies so rapidly that the torpedo has nothing to home in on. (The first incarnation of their machine used a piano roll to change between 88 frequencies, a mechanism that came right out of Antheil's desire to create a machine-based music that could be perfectly repeated with every performance). While the government never used their invention, it became the basis for cell phone technology, so that billions of people can make calls without cancelling out each other's frequencies.

The production had a lavish technical presentation, with a bevy of player pianos and other percussion instructions connected by computer and a method (which was new to me) for projecting 3D images onstage, images that the actors could move through and around. In addition (because it had a composer as a central character), it had a few song-and-dance routines as well, which the two actors pulled off with panache. As one review stated, "The entire experience is a feast for the eyes and ears."

Which was, from another angle, the reason why the show, at least for me, quickly became something I watched rather than something that engaged me. While the creators tried to establish a frisson between Hedy and George in order to anchor the abstract in the emotional, there was never any real pull between the characters because the writers had given them no secrets to hide. All subtext became text in the work so that the audience was never in any doubt about the attraction they felt for each other and for the scientific work they were doing.

This, then, is the divide I see in theatre, between "theatre" or the "theatrical" and the "dramatic" — the presentation vs. the gravitational. In screenwriting class, we were told that "if a scene is about what the scene is about, then you're in deep shit" — meaning that if the scene lacked subtext, if it lacked a subterranean flow that pulled us in one direction while the surface flow pulled us in another, then the scene lacked drama, "punch." All the audience is doing is watching an unfolding rather than an uncovering, neck-and-neck with the velocity of the scene rather than a little behind and working to catch up.

As in *Frequency Hopping*" (though this can be said of many of the pieces I've seen recently), subtext becomes text, mystery becomes declaration, and in the end, we have a piece of theatre rather than a dramatic work.

If subtext-turned-to-text defines "theatrical," what makes the dramatic "dramatic"? David Mamet once said (and this is a rough paraphrase, taken from memory) that all great plays are, at heart, mystery plays, and that the characters in them are trying to say the unsayable. This is why a good dramatic writer uses all the tools in the dramatic toolkit, such as revelations, reversals, ironies, misdirection, silences/rests, surprises, and diversions in order to create both the mystery that needs to be voiced and the struggles of the characters to voice the mystery. (Tom Stoppard, in an interview with Leonard Lopate on WNYC, said that all dramatic theatre is a "series of ambushes upon the audience," and, as with all good ambushes, the best ones work when they are complete surprises to their victims.) Once an audience either gets ahead of the story or is simply

viewing the story as opposed to trying to solve it along with the characters, then the production has shifted from a dramatic to a theatrical production.

There will always be a place, and a need, for the kind of production labeled "experimental" or "avant-garde," for the efforts of theater creators to shake up the settled and de-barnacle the ordinary. But, for me at least (and I may be in the minority here), once the cleverness or brashness wears off (such as with the holographic projections in *Frequency Hopping*), there must be some other movement underneath to draw in the audience member, some mystery that needs solving, some unsaid thing struggling to be said, or else the production becomes all show and no heart. There must be a push-pull between upper and lower currents that will make us sit up in our seats and make the piece stick in the brain after the lights go out.

Dogme95's effort to "force the truth out of [the] characters and setting" was another way of saying this: abjure the tricks of the trade in favor of as unmediated a presentation as possible of the tectonics between the text and subtext of the characters' struggles to make sense of the yet-to-be-sensed.

My Dogme(fill in the year) would say the same.

The Macho Zone

(October 2008)

Many years ago the Marvelous Maria-Beatriz and I had one of those events happen to us that makes me wonder (a bit) about my disbelief in a force that guides the fortunes of the universe.

We were traveling back from New York to Boston by Greyhound bus. We had missed our 2 p.m. connection, but we had another one at 2:30, so no great loss. As we boarded, a woman ran up to Maria-Beatriz with a young child in her arms and another one in tow. Behind her stood a younger woman holding one of those bags for baby paraphernalia (diapers, bottles, etc.) and a stroller. She said to Maria-Beatriz (in Spanish), "Do you speak Spanish?" (somehow she knew, or guessed, that Maria-Beatriz did speak Spanish) and in the same moment handed Maria-Beatriz the child in her arms. Maria-Beatriz took the child as the woman blurted out that she needed Maria-Beatriz to take the child as if it were her own because the bus line would allow one child to ride free with the parent but not two, and since she had two children but only money enough for her own ticket... Maria-Beatriz said she understood, and up the two of us went into the bus, suddenly the parents of (what we later learned to be) a 1½-year old boy with a cold.

The woman (her name was Kati, as we learned later, from Puerto Rico) got on with the other child, a beautiful girl about 3 years old, and Kati's friend handed up the bag, then stowed the stroller in the baggage compartment and waved goodbye as she disappeared into the crowd. We got four seats next to each other — two on one side of the aisle, two on the other — and the bus filled up, then waddled out of Port Authority and onto the highway.

Four hours to Boston, so a long time to hear a story and tell other stories and cradle a wheezing snot-filled cranky little boy to calm him down and play games with a remarkably polite little girl. Kati was running from an abusive relationship with a man; the friend helped her escape when she had the chance to do so, grabbing whatever she could as she sped to Port Authority. She had a friend in Lowell who had agreed to meet her at South Station in Boston. From there, she would head back home to Puerto Rico.

A familiar enough story, especially for Maria-Beatriz in her profession as a social worker assisting troubled families. Enroute, Maria-Beatriz spoke with the

friend in Lowell and made arrangements for the meeting and pick-up at the bus terminal.

Except that South Station is a big place, many-entranced, the kind of place that doesn't always conform to even the most precise directional instructions. So we arrived and melded into the bustle of train-goers and -arrivers, bus-takers and -leavers, subway voles — and the friend could not be found. Eventually, Maria-Beatriz and Kati, taking the little girl, headed off to scout while I stayed with the little boy and the "luggage."

So, here I am holding this wheezing, sleeping boy against my chest, swaying slightly, eddied about by the blank-faced rush of people "on the go" — and then it happened. The boy had a name, and that name was Macho. (I never learned if this was his real name or a nick-name, but it was the only name I had.) I had Macho's weight in my arms, I had his breath against my shirt and through that to my skin, and the both of us, protecting each other, slipped into what I later called "the Macho Zone": all the world around us in its anonymous drivenness, and the two of us nestled against each other bubbled by that warmth and protection. In the Zone, time slowed, even (at times) evaporated; necessity reduced itself to protecting one single human being; noise dampened to an unbrutish soothe; my body metronomed a bit to comfort the sleeping boy and my own anxiety.

What a beautiful place, this Macho Zone: clear, distinct, unharnessed, full of grace. And finite. They found the friend, Kati and her children got transferred to the friend's car, and off they went to Lowell and (we presumed, since we never heard anything about them) to Puerto Rico. And us to home and memory.

What has all of this to with anything?

I've often thought that great theatre, or great moments in theatre — and I mean "great," not just the merely good, or the momentarily popular — create their own form of the Macho Zone. And I don't just mean beauty or sublimity either — Aristotle's "fear and pity" can also create the Zone. Because the Zone lies beyond appreciation or criticism, beyond critique and considered parsing, beyond prizes and reviews, and moves toward the destruction of reality by suspending the crush of that reality's insistent forwardness. In this sense, the Zone is a dream, where time and space lose formal shape and all certainties die a welcome death and we are released from the death-grip of a principled life into what can only be called the comfort of having and expecting nothing, otherwise known as grace.

The Zone is momentary — must be so. And incredibly hard to create, since so much of it, like the story that inspired my thinking about it, depends upon the chance meeting, the unpredictable intersection, some quantum re-mix that could never be commanded into being.

I feel, as I move along in my career, that if I can create one, maybe two, Zone moments in something I write, I can consider myself a successful and forceful writer. And even that conclusion — "successful and forceful" — is bogus because it is not something one can arm-twist into being. Just as with the young boy, all I can do is hold onto something breathing and human and in the process of growing and evolving, sway back and forth, and let what washes over and around me wash over and around me — and then record what I can with as much unaffected honesty as I can, send it off to the world, and wait to see what (if anything) happens.

In the Small Hours

(November 2008)

I am my father's son: an organized, diligent, harness-wearer who, unless illness has him gripped by the throat or tragedy has broken down the door, will hie himself off to work because that is what a conscientious person does, personal dislike be damned.

I could say that I make my schedules, but in truth, as is the case with every conscientious drone, the schedules make the person.

But Newton's law about actions and reactions also plays out in the existential, and there come those nights when, either because of a rebellious biological clock or an over-busy mind, I find myself wide awake in the small hours of the morning — that ante-meridian limbo where time seems thinned out and less clutching, where it's possible to float for a while unharnessed from schedules and appointments.

At first I try to "make the best use" of the time, firing up the computer and diving into my current project, or cracking open that book on economics for one more try at understanding some arcane statistics. But luckily this impulse passes — my body, with its own wisdom, rejects turning these hours into an extended work session. This time is a gift, and "should" and "ought to" will have no pull whatsoever.

I take a walk over to the all-night supermarket, not to buy anything but just to observe who would do their shopping at such an unencumbered hour: the guy off second shift, young adults wheeling home after a party, elderly people shedding sleep as they get older, a few drunks and zomboids, the aisles clogged with stock clerks cramming new product onto the shelves. At the 24-hour CVS the bored clerks gossip, the store empty, the fluorescent lights and garish banners eye-achingly bright.

Back in my office I take out what I call my "bit book," a journal of random jottings and notions, and start to write, pleasuring in the longhand feel of the pen against the page after a day of keyboard and monitor. Down our main drag the occasional car sizzles by; its doppler fade leaves the air still and resonant, like a drum head. As I write my sense of "time passing" dissolves — I am in that Zen state where I am doing only one thing with mindfulness, without the fishhooks of a thousand distractions pulling my flesh in all directions. It's a fleeting, but bracing, sense of wholeness.

I pull out that book of poetry I never seem to make time to read and swaddle myself in the words. I put on some music and simply sit and listen to it with full ears, not just as background. I write a letter to a friend with a direct voice rather dashing something off as an obligation. Without "time's wing'd chariot" breathing down on me, simple things incandesce with real pleasure.

But even this interlude must end. Standing out on our back stoop, I watch the eastern sky soak up the approaching sun's light, and with each change in tint and brightness I can feel the schedules and obligations slowly re-ambush the day. There's that project that has to be in the mail, that office supplies order that needs to be sent — and coffee in the afternoon when I'd prefer a nap. But until the sun actual takes the sky, while overhead is still just a swath of suggestive tints and the air is still empty of its daily sonic crush, I feel at peace, a sense of proportion repaired.An antidote, a sanity, in the nick of time.

And then the news helicopters come to hang over the entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel to report on the traffic clog, their rotors clabbering the air into the curdled workday, and the first New Jersey Transit buses pick up the early-goers like a street cleaner sucks up dead leaves, and everything becomes (trans)muted into the aptly named daily grind. I check the news for the traffic report and make the cup of coffee that signals the re-triumph of the scheduled and the demanded. And off I go.

Seasonal Thoughts

(December 2008)

SQUIRREL

Out in the yard, squarely (rectangularly?) framed by the window next to my desk, is a three-pronged maple tree, a trident of wood about 50 to 60 years old (judging by its diameter), thirty feet tall. When I look at it I see at least three things: a good full cord of wood that would thrill a stove; a weather barometer made of leaves and color; and a housing project for squirrels and birds. The first is proprietary and economic, the second scientific, and the third poetic, which, blended together, is not a bad way to look at the world.

Right now it's the squirrels that interest me most, even though the changing leaves, in their yellowing demise, push hard for attention. I have two squirrels that use the tree regularly. They've been foraging steadily the last month in the fallen leaves around the tree, moving through the debris like electrons through a cloud chamber, leaving faint trails flagged by a twitching grey exclamatory tail. (More on the tail in a moment.) This pair doesn't chatter all that much, intent, I suppose, on getting enough before there's not enough. They're meanderingly industrious (even as my fingers forage through these keys to describe them), pausing often to play but never really abandoning their attack on the stinginess of the coming winter.

The tail. These two have plush tails, handsome tails, a spectrum of grey from dark grey shoots near the core of the tail to pearl grey tips, like a plume of woodsmoke on a cold October day. The tail sometimes seems to have life of its own, sometimes thoroughly erect like the flag on a mailbox announcing a package to be sent, at other times whimsically undulating, like a feather-duster being shaken out a window. It metronomes, points, see-saws, gavels, gesturing out whatever passes for a passing thought in a squirrel. Like our own faces it moves often of its own accord, and so we have to accord it respect, even if we often don't know what it's saying.

The other day they chased each other up and down the maple for at least ten minutes, the dry scuttle of their claws mixed with their cheeps and chittering. They moved up and down the three main trunks, out on to thin whispers of limbs where they launched themselves either up or down to another thicker branches, along the chainlink fence around the yard, over the garbage cans,

through the dry brocade of dead leaves, back up the trunks -- some squirrel version of "tag," though "it-ness" changed constantly, each squirrel taking turns being both pursued and pursuer.

During this frantic gamboling they paused occasionally to carry a seed or cart an acorn from the oaks next door up to their nests up the branches, then picked up the Keystone chase without a blink of an eye (if squirrels blink). At times they were so fast I couldn't see them, their grey pelts blending with the maple's grey bark, descending from the upper part of the tree in a scattering spiral that brought them into view, then out of view, like a coin in the hand of a good magician. Then back to foraging, their noses flickering like some geiger counter attuned to the radiation of food.

It may not be the same two squirrels I see each time, but there are always two, and so I make them the same. I have written this in much the same way they have worked, sometimes having the words just spiral down the trunk of my brain in a flashy descent, at other times picking through various dead leaves to find a husk redolent of food, stored away in a sentence for a later feast. And as for winter -- I am pulling my skin in around me just as tightly as they are, cheeping and jabbering until the snow slows the blood, even then pushing out occasionally to taste the saved vittle and catch the cold that affirms the contained warmth under the skin, underlines the brain poking through waste to find what feeds.

WINTER

When Shakespeare began *Richard III* with "Now is the winter of our discontent," he began with the wrong season. Summer is the real season of discontent. Summer has all the disadvantages and none of the benefits of temptation, ratcheting the desires up tight with devilish enticement but never offering a spasm worth the twinge. Summer does have some virtues, like a boring man who dresses well. But summer is really cheap seats, soft ice-cream, crumbs in the bottom of the cold water bottle.

So what recommends the great and glorious winter, this season of content? Many people don't understand winter. They see winter as confinement and negation, the natural symbol of being sent to bed without supper. But the opposite is really true. Winter brings reality down to inescapable essentials: warmth, decent food, serviceable clothing, proportional thought, considered action. Winter helps us measure ourselves; it resists us and does not protect

our cherished myths about superiority or talent. It is a harsh-lighted mirror that throws back at us what we are not and what we need to become. Where summer is sand that shifts, a smooth undulation, winter is crazed ice over purling water, one element in two versions, just as we in ourselves hold the ice of death and the free water of imagination.

The winter I think of most often is the first winter Thoreau must have spent at (and on) Walden Pond. His cabin was ten by fifteen, heated from a fireplace built with his own hands, his woodshed a few steps from his front door. The closest sign of life was the railroad a few rods from him; Concord was a mile and a half away. As the shingles of his cabin grew more weathered during his first winter there, so must have he. By investigating his world, he investigated himself. The depths of the pond he recorded so dutifully were his own depths, its length and breadth the geography of his own place in the world.

Thoreau could not have done what he did if he lived where it was always summer. He needed a world of contrasts in order to find comparisons. He needed a restricted world in order to find what was free and unlimited. He needed a world loosened from material desire, even from emotional desire, so that he could hear and distill the silence of a December night. Our modern world is in part filled with too much summer, too much that simply is without question or balancing contrast. A strong dose of Thoreauvian winter, both literal and figurative, would remind us of essentials, and the coldness that surrounds us might be balanced by the warmth of discovery and explanation.

HIBERNATION

It's too bad humans gave up hibernation. I read an interesting book review the other day about how our bodies still prepare for winter, taking on extra weight, lengthening sleep patterns, changing metabolic rates. The author went on to say that much of the stress we feel during the winter months comes from the disjunction of what our bodies are prepared to do and what we, in our modern rush, push them to do. Natural law again loses out to cultural law: Slow Down loses out to Make A Buck.

But imagine the benefits if humans restored their ability to hibernate. Think of the simple physical blessings. First, we'd be choreographed into nature's own cycle of recuperation. We wouldn't be stressed by imposed chronologies, such as eastern standard time. Our bodies would move to their own rhythms and there

would be a comfortable buffer between the necessities of the outside world and our own universe of heartbeat and breathing. We would become full of health.

There would be social advantages as well. We could avoid the strain of the holidays, celebrating thanks and gifts in the spring when the world alarms us to become fully alive once more. We would be able to take a time-out from each other. We could indulge a required truce and get away for a while from the narrow view we have of each other's faults and insufficiencies. We could build some tolerance for the inevitable disappointments our imperfect natures seem to promise. A lengthy absence from social tangling might go a long way toward making us all less defensive, less afraid, more forgiving.

There might be economic dislocations, of course, when most of the world in the far northern and southern latitudes decide to sleep for six months or so, but they could be adjusted for. Or we could simple say that those who wish to work can, and those who wish to hibernate can hibernate, gradually hoping to convince the Type A's that hibernation is not a personal insult to their vision of the future. Politically, a long lull in international tensions would only be to the good.

Think how this hibernation would feel, this movement of the individual body towards its own North Star, towards its own center from which the rest of the world radiates. Having reached that center the self can begin to build its own peace, sleeping hour by sleeping hour, not only refreshing the machinery but also giving pause to the army of fears and wounds that too often threaten to overawe all of who we are. Shakespeare said that sleep was a rehearsal for death. Not so here - hibernation would be a dress run for living again.

THANKSGIVING

I've always found Thanksgiving a strange holiday. What, exactly, are we giving thanks for? There's the usual party line, that we're re-creating the original Thanksgiving Day meal of the Pilgrims and giving thanks to some Creator for the privilege of life. But we don't really eat what they ate -- turkey was not on the table, for one thing, and the fare, while abundant, was fairly simple. And we certainly don't eat the meal with the same sense of blessed relief the Pilgrims did, having suffered tortuous weather, disease, and failure from almost the moment they set foot on shore. We usually try to see if we can cram in that last soupcon of potato or pie, and then take a nap.

And thanking the Creator -- think about that for a moment. When we thank someone, we thank them *for something*, a gift of some sort, and a gift that acknowledges the essence of who we are. What sorts of gifts has the Creator given us? Disease, tornadoes, mosquitoes, parasites, not to mention the ills created by our active imaginations, like soft ice cream and television. These aren't gifts. Far too often they become penances, and if a gift reveals the intentions of the giftgiver, then our Creator has a rather low opinion of his creation. It's meaningless to give thanks to a Creator who never consulted with us about how we wanted to be created, or whether we wanted to be created at all.

What is it, then, that we should be giving thanks to? In 1938, Wilbur Cross, governor of Connecticut, wrote a tribute to Thanksgiving in the *New York Times*. In a somewhat gushing style, he wrote that we should give thanks for "the harvest of earth, the yield of patient mind and faithful hand, that have kept us fed and clothed and have made for us a shelter even against the storm."

I like these words because they implicitly tell us that we should be giving thanks to everyone and every thing that has made it possible to render our lives on this earth. To be sure, there is enough hatred, disappointment, and anger to go around for what parents didn't do and what lovers didn't do and what life itself has failed to deliver, enough sometimes to make us believe that being thankful is a fool's errand. But all that "realism" is usually the work of 364 days of the year. On this day it would be worth it to give time to remembering what and who has made things possible rather than impossible, passable rather than impassable. Look at the faces of the family around the table or listen closely to the voice on the phone or even give a moment to the car that ferries you around, usually with only minimal maintenance, and find that point of light that is the gift from that source. Then give thanks, and that will keep us clothed and fed for another year, keep the storm from our houses.