

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Finding My New Voice in the Windy City

Eric · Friday, June 26th, 2015

Ok, so I'm climbing another old creaky, wooden staircase, up into the unknown. Up into my future.

It's the summer of 1970 and I'm in the Windy City of Chicago. In "Old Town", the refurbished, creative hub of the city on the near north side, where the Second City comedy troupe of Paul Sills and Alan Arkin fame will soon become home to the next comic crew of John Belushi, Gilda Radner, and Bill Murray. Where tourists can bring their suburban kids to have hand-made, miniature glass-blown animals delicately crafted for them by pretty girls with perfect smiles and steady hands. Where my former high school crush, Marjorie, now lives on Eugenie Street with her Pennsylvania-Dutch -Amish husband, Richard, who didn't need a high draft number, like me, to keep him out of Vietnam, because he's naturally a conscientious objector. He has principles. He married Marjorie.



My Dutch-Amish rival

I never had the courage to ask Marjorie out in high school; that's why she remained a crush, and how Richard got to marry her after they went to Temple University together in Philadelphia, while I went to the State University in shoddy and cold Buffalo, New York. Marjorie was the one who got away. Long blond hair, magical breasts, and a limp from childhood polio. We were in all the same classes together; we dissected a dead mouse in tandem in Mr. Wayne's AP biology class. I know she liked me too. One day, I almost carried her books home for her after school, but... like I said, I never had the *cojones* to ask. To carry her books. To ask her to the prom... which I never went to... because I was a really socially-awkward, terribly-repressed "smart kid" in high school, who was ostracized from all the "regular kids" who used to be my friends, but who now spurned me because of the "e-classes" I was put in, even though I begged my mother not to sentence me to them. "It'll be good for you, Eric."

And so sentenced I was. No girls, no prom, no Marjorie.

Nevertheless, I had called her as soon as I arrived in Chicago in the Wolf, my 1964 Pontiac Tempest with the green & brown, army-camouflaged left rear fender, who I had driven up and down the wide map of America since the first day of Spring, 1970. I had lived “on the road” for 4 months, on my Jack-Kerouac-Bob Dylan personal Odyssey, which I had wanted to make ever since I had listened to Dylan and read Kerouac in college, and cut the painful umbilical from my suburban and conventional GI Joe family.

Once I’d moved into lower Manhattan and **literally lost my voice to discomfort and fear**, I guess my eyes, ears, and curiosity took over. I only knew one thing, I had to find a new one.

In the Om Zig loft where I was living without a stitch of connection to my awkward past, I met Curly Ray, a pimpled-faced, 25 year old cowboy who sang songs from the South and the West, on his gui-tar. Who, although not very impressive in stature or girth, had all the “experience” that Jimi Hendrix sang about, and all the experience I hungered for: sexual, creative, geographical, self-expressive, adult, artistic, “whataya got?”



On the Road

That’s why I had “hit the road” – to catch up with Curly Ray: Mississippi, Alabama, the Carolinas, the Florida Keys. Memphis, Nashville... Louisville, Kentucky, where I stopped to see the home of my boyhood hero, Cassius Clay. I covered the waterfronts, the Blue Ridge Drive, the Smoky Mountains, the Bayou, the Delta; I stopped in every town I ever heard of. I’d roll into a new town at dusk, roll down the window, and ask the first person I’d see on the street, “Where’s the long hair part of town?” And without a hitch, with either a positive spin.... or the opposite... they’d send me to “my people”.... to the longhairs... the hippies... the counter culturalists... the revolutionaries... to the artists. But that’s... another story altogether. I call it “Travels with Wolfie”.

But now... here I am... at the end of those unwashed and tangled four months. I pull into Chi-town with Christopher, my long, blond-haired and bearded, Jesus-looking road buddy who I’ve picked up in Peachtree Park in Atlanta. We’ve seen the 7 year locusts in Cincinnati together, had our tarot cards read in Paducah, and slid down waterfalls in square-dancin’ Asheville. But now it’s time to part, as all road warriors must do sooner or later, so Chris heads north to Minnesota, and I call Marjorie.

“Yeah, it’s me. I could really use a shower and a place to crash.”

“Sure, let me ask Richard, but I’m sure it’s ok. Come over.”

So I do. It’s a bit awkward at first. I mean, I’m really dirty and tangled, but nothing that Marjorie

and Richard apparently can't handle. Marjorie is as beautiful as ever, and Richard, well, what can I say? He's one nice, soft-spoken and lucky guy.

After a lonnnnng shower and my first good night's sleep in over four months, at least one on a comfortable bed with clean sheets in a respectable neighborhood, they suggest I walk over to Wells Street, just down the perfectly-landscaped Old Town street, to the Free Street Theater, to have a look.

I do....



One step at a time

And that's how I got here... to this old, creaky wooden staircase, climbing up... to my beckoning future. I don't know where it's going to take me, but hey, what can you do when you're on a quest... other than take one step after the other?

I get to the top of the stairway... and stare into a giant old, wood-floored assembly room. Maybe the building used to be a VFW post or a Moose Lodge, but now it's home to Columbia College's Free Street Theater, run by rock 'n roll music impresario, Bill Russo. Barrel-chested, with a long silver-flecked pony tail, he's rehearsing in the cavernous space with a group of about 20 totally-focused students. They all stop... to look at the long-haired, curly-locked dude at the top of the stair... me. Beat. (That's what we call a designed pause in the theater.) It's as if they've all been waiting for me. Very strange.

"Are you an actor?" Russo asks me, with his entire troupe waiting for my answer. Me? An actor?

"Uh... yep." What the hell, sometimes you just gotta roll the dice, right? I mean, I took that La Mama workshop in New York. I was in Jacob's Appearance Dance Troupe for two months, doing our performance piece, "Disappearance," right? Actor? Well, okay, it was a stretch. But you see, they needed a player who looked exactly like me. Or rather, who looked like Abbie Hoffman, the long, curly-haired Jew from the 1968 Democratic Convention and the revolutionary counter-cultural, comic political party, the Yippies – to play in their upcoming production of William Burroughs's famous play, *Naked Lunch*. I fit the bill.



Abbie f-ing Hoffman

"Whataya say?" Russo asks. "You can jump right in or come back tomorrow."

"Uh... I just got into town yesterday. Lemme think about it over night."

"Alright," Russo says, "the part's yours if you want it."

Wow! I've never acted in my life. In a play. In anything. I was always too repressed. Too scared to even sing a note or take a dance step in my entire 21 year, up-until-then, "child-student" life. But now... this guy, Russo, has just offered me a part. Abbie fucking Hoffman. In William fucking Burroughs, "beat" play, *Naked fucking Lunch*! I should take it, right? Right?

But... I'm even more surprised and impressed with my non answer. So considered and mature. "Lemme think about it." Hey, maybe I *had* learned something in my 4 months "on the road."

Nah... who was I kidding? I was just scared to death.

But I do watch them rehearse a little bit more. They're doing a bunch of "schwah-hooing" that I know from Scott Kelman's New York workshop. I figure I might be able to fake my way through things, but then.... on my way out... I see a sign posted on a bulletin board at the top of the stairs: "Male dancers wanted. The Dance Troupe in residence at Columbia College. Auditions tonight, 6 pm."

Huh....? Dance auditions? That could be me, right? Like I said, I had danced and tumbled with Jacob's thrown-together dance troupe for over two months in New York. That had to be good for something. I was in good athletic shape, and more importantly, I was hungry. For life. For opportunity. For change.



My 1st mentor, Shirley Mordine I go back to Marjorie's and Richard's. Richard loans me some sweat pants, and at 5:55 pm, I climb the old wooden stairs for a 2nd time that day, and I audition for "The Dance Troupe," directed by Shirley Mordine, a professional dancer and choreographer from California, who would soon become my first mentor and teacher.

Because, you see, it turns out... Shirley and The Dance Troupe had just lost its one and only male dancer, a young black guy who I would never get to meet. Mitch. They were desperate. So desperate... that after the 6 o'clock audition, where I stumble lamely through some complicated Indian Khatak dance steps... they offer me... a full scholarship to join their summer workshop... whose goal is to create a new, original piece... to perform... in public... in the Fall.

"Hey, I'm just passing through. I'm 'on the road', ya know? I'll be driving up through Wisconsin and Minnesota next, then across Canada from Winnipeg to Vancouver, then down the West Coast to another Summer of Love in San Francisco, baby. I can't be tied down to performance dates, conventional hours, commitments. But... you know... it sounds like a really great opportunity. And if I split now, I'll come back in July to do the workshop. Whataya say?"

And so there it was... the opportunity. The opportunity I was so hungrily looking for. Or, as some guru somewhere once said, "If the train of opportunity stops right in front of you, baby, hell, you better hop on... because you never know... IF... it will ever come by again." And, like I said, male modern dancers were few and far between. I think they probably *still* are... at least in the Windy City of Chicago.... in the summer, 1970...

"So ok, yeah, I'll be back July 5th."



Optimistic, unformed, Trules

And so I was... after another rollicking trip across Canada in the summer of 1970 when the Canadian government was offering free room and board to all us longhairs crossing their country from east to west and west to east. After visiting Joni Mitchell's home in Saskatoon. After picking fruit in Penticton, British Columbia. After getting frost bitten in Grand Teton National Park. After getting arrested for reckless driving in the Black Hills of North Dakota and

spending three days in Wild Bill Hickok's jail in Deadwood. But that's another story altogether. I call it "Travels with Wolfie, Part 2?...."

...which concludes, of course, with my pulling the Wolf back up to the Free Street Theater on July 5, 1970 in Old Town Chicago, where, as promised, I take my first day of workshop with Shirley Mordine's "Dance Troupe" in residence at Columbia College. Where... I soon discover... the first day of... the rest of my life.

Where... the core Dance Troupe company is in the room: Donna from Roslyn, Long Island, a free-spirited, round-bodied modern dancer whose Dad is the creator and producer of *Captain Kangaroo*. And Susan, the valedictorian of Valley Stream High, also surprisingly, from Long Island, who has given up her future law career at the University of Chicago to also become a modern dancer, and who, one day, will become my sad and silent comic foil, Max, the Clown. And 19 year old Christine, a lithe and nubile African-American dancer, long before "African-American" became the politically-correct "nom du jour." And that's it... the "company"... plus Shirley, of course... plus a few other homegrown Chicago girls, back from college for the summer, who have also signed up for Shirley's summer dance workshop. But then, lo and behold, there's another guy... Tom Jerumba, a professional colleague of Shirley's who teaches dance and movement at the Goodman Theater downtown.

It's the perfect fit... small, intimate, not too much pressure. Time and space to explore... to get to know one another... to create something together. Shirley is masterful at getting us, and letting us, improvise to discover our own ideas and our own movement, and then composing with all of our contributions... an abstract, imagistic dance-theater storytelling piece called "Tongues". Even on the first day, I can tell that I've landed in the right place.



First Steps

The only problem is that I don't have a place to rest my weary head. I've driven all through the night from Iowa City and arrived just in time for the 10 a.m. workshop, without ever bothering about a place to stay. I can't impose on Marjorie and Richard again for the whole summer.

"No..... problem," as they said back in the day. In the spirit of the times and dancerly camaraderie, Donna offers me her attic, with a mattress on the floor, two floors above where she and her boyfriend, Dan, live on Shubert Street in New Town, just north of Diversey. She hooks up a cow bell on a long rope from her window to mine that she rings every morning to wake me up, and she even feeds me before the workshop. Hell, I'm one lucky guy.

Because that's the way it goes all summer. Hard work. Sweat. Romantic nights on Donna's starlit rooftop. And sound, sound sleep... from beautiful, physical exhaustion... before the cowbell rings for the new day. I've never had a routine so challenging. So different from anything I've ever known. Dance classes every day, three hour rehearsals, stretching my tight, really-too-late-to-dance, 22 year old hamstrings and lower back muscles, it's the perfect remedy for the over-achieving, over-educated boy who wants to become... who *has* to become... someone new.

And over the next seven years, I never leave Chicago. I become... a modern dancer. Highly unlikely... if you ask anyone who ever knew me. I don't open a book for any of those seven years. Instead, I discover my body, its impulses, my creativity, my lust and hunger... for life. Everything I was taught for 22 years on the academic conveyor belt of American education is useless to me.

Ninety five per cent of my body exists below my chin. It's the only part I want to know about... to learn about.

So I do. My “new voice” is my body's.

Four years later, in 1974, five members of the slightly-expanded Dance Troupe leave Columbia College and our teacher, Shirley Mordine, to form our own “dance collective” called “MoMing”, a unique word that means “nameless” in Chinese. (Actually, the story goes: that the seven of us could never come to consensus on a name for our new company and dance space, so we consulted our t'ai chi teacher, Mr. Lui, who told us that “there was once a lake in northern China sooo beautiful that it could never be named. And so it remained... nameless. It was called, ‘MoMing’.”) And that was good enough for all seven of us.



MoMing Dance Theater, 1974

At MoMing, I learned to choreograph my own dance-theater pieces. I learned about creating and running a non-profit arts institution and how to write grants that were actually funded. I learned how impossibly hard it was to run an organization with seven bodies and seven brains. I learned about compromise... a little. I taught modern dance, improvisation, and even some ballet (ridiculous, if you ask me) – for a living. \$100 a week. I did a lot of house sitting. I formed the MoMing Bozo Ensemble which was funded by the Illinois Arts Council, and I was conscripted to teach “clowning,” something I never studied in my life. I had my first live-in girlfriend, cheated on her prolifically, stopped smoking marijuana, soaked up the urban blues, produced city-wide music and dance concerts, and came into my own. As an adult. As an artist. I performed in a midnight show called “The Whores of Babylon” on Lincoln Avenue where I played Samson to 3 different Delilahs, 2 gorgeously, in drag. I was voted one of “Chicago’s “Heavy 75,” and I started to... grow up. Sort of. But that’s another story altogether. I call it “Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man,” but...

... perhaps you’ve heard it before....

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