

INDELICATELY UNBALANCED

(From *The Play That Changed My Life*, 2009)

In Polish-Catholic, blue-collar South Chicago in the 1950's and 1960's where I grew up, going to the theatre was not exactly a favorite local pastime. Bowling, yes. Theatre, no.

Still, I recall my parents dressing up and heading into the Chicago Loop one Saturday evening to take in something called *A Man For All Seasons*. One Christmas my father took me to an Agatha Christie-wannabe called *Hostile Witness* with Ray Milland the same Saturday afternoon my mother took my sisters to see *Half A Sixpence* with Tommy Steele further down State Street. My mother once treated me to Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* with John Gavin (or was it John Saxon?) at a dinner theatre. The very first show I ever saw was a *Pinocchio* my mother took me to at the old Goodman Theatre, which back then was a musty, rather funereal establishment in Grant Park. After the play I stood in the lobby with my program and reverently got the autographs of the Fox and the Fairy Princess. I would have married the Fairy Princess but I was only 7.

(And where is she now, that young actress in the blue tulle and the tiara?)

Of course, theatre was far more present and more respected in the general culture back then. Men went to the theatre in jackets and ties, not in shorts, flipflops and T-shirts, nor would anyone think of sucking on a plastic water bottle during the climax of *Death of a Salesman* as someone near me recently did. Ed Sullivan showed scenes from current Broadway plays on his popular Sunday-evening variety show. Caedmon Records brought out major contemporary plays on multi-record sets and the public service radio station in Chicago broadcast them. I remember

listening to *Incident At Vichy* while trying to do my high-school homework at our kitchen table, fighting to keep my attention on geometry. Arthur Miller won.

Around that time, Edward Albee came to Chicago to speak to an auditorium thick with blue-haired ladies in the Conrad Hilton ballroom and I went to hear him. An actual living and breathing playwright made for an astonishing spectacle to a 17-year-old kid. I knew who Edward Albee was because I'd spent the previous summer sitting on our porch reading *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* out loud to myself over and over again.

After Albee's lecture – which he spent excoriating critics and popular tastes in plays – a lady rose to ask a question.

“Mr. Albee,” she said, “you keep using the phrase *an educated taste*. What do you mean by *an educated taste*?”

“What I mean by *an educated taste*,” Edward Albee said fluidly, “is someone who has the same tastes that I have.”

How. Utterly. Cool.

After the lecture I happened to notice, through an open doorway, Mr. Albee standing in a sort of carpeted gallery outside the lecture hall. I approached timidly as he ordered a vodka tonic from some assistant, and I decided I would always drink vodka tonics. He turned to me with that ferocious look of his (it remained ferocious to the end of his life, as I found out from sitting by him at Dramatist Guild Council meetings) *yet he turned out to be very, very nice*. I recall being bold enough to venture the opinion that Eugene O'Neill's dialogue seemed kind of clumsy. And *Edward Albee agreed with me*. It was like Euripides saying he didn't think much of Aeschylus' overheated style.

Then came an afternoon during my senior year when I went to Chicago's Studebaker Theatre (now vanished) to see a matinee of Albee's *A Delicate Balance* with Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy. There are so few moments in life about which one can say *everything was entirely different after that*. The two hours of that play were such a moment. My whole life pivoted, all in two hours.

I had never seen anything like that play, had never seen people tear themselves apart like that, or need or love each other like that, had never heard such eloquence or wit or honesty. In my upper seat, I seemed to be sitting in the front car of a rollercoaster. The balcony itself in my recollection feels as if it's tipping forward to spill me out onto the stage I'm so dizzy, so undone, so high. Hume Cronyn performing the long aria about the cat ("The cat that I had...when I was – well, a year or so before I *met* you...") has to be one of the great moments of my life.

After the performance I stood waiting outside the theatre. Cronyn and Tandy came out, headed for a waiting taxi. I got their autographs on my program and stammered something about how much I had loved the show. They got in the cab and drove away.

I may as well have gone home that afternoon and put a note on the kitchen table: *Dear Mom and Dad. I am going to be a playwright. Don't try to stop me.* I wanted to spend my lifetime chasing what I'd seen and heard in that vertiginous balcony that day. I still have my signed program, and the ticket stub to that matinee. Price, \$3.65.

Flash forward. Suitcase in hand, I am riding up the elevator of the Mondrian Hotel on the Sunset Strip. It's now a balmy Sunday evening in the mid-1980's and I am twice as old as I was the afternoon I went to see *A Delicate Balance*. I have come to Los Angeles for my first Hollywood meeting. The following afternoon at three o'clock I'm supposed to meet with the

head of Universal Studios and pitch an idea for a screenplay. If he likes my idea, I'll get a job writing the script.

The elevator doors open on the fourth floor to let me out, and there, standing before me in a paisley dressing gown and a silk ascot and slippers, is Hume Cronyn, looking for all the world like Tobias of *A Delicate Balance*. Unaware of me, he's looking off right and off left rather distractedly. I step out of the elevator and I cannot help myself.

"Hello, Mr. Cronyn," I say.

He turns to me. "Oh. Hello. Have you seen the maid?" That familiar honking voice I know from the movies. The voice that once told me about a cat.

"I haven't seen the maid," I said. "I've just arrived..."

We set off down the corridor together, inadvertently side by side. Once again I cannot help myself.

"Mr. Cronyn," I venture, "I have to tell you... You changed my life. You and your wife."

"Really?" he says, stopping in his tracks. "How is that?"

I tell him about seeing *A Delicate Balance* those many years before. He hears me out, clearly pleased, his hands jammed in the pockets of his dressing gown *just the way people do that onstage*.

He says to me, "What are you doing in Hollywood?"

"I've come for my first – possible – Hollywood job. Tomorrow."

"Where?"

"Universal."

"Jessie and I are filming at Universal. Why don't we take you to lunch in the commissary?"

“Ummm,” I say. “All right.”

We shake hands and go our separate ways, parting at the intersection of two corridors. I find my hotel room, turn on the light, and stand there unbelieving. *I’ve just met Hume Cronyn.*

My phone rings. How can this be? I don’t know anyone in Hollywood. I pick up.

“Yes?”

“Hello,” I hear from the other end, “is this David? This is Hume. Come to soundstage 22 around one o’clock and tell them we’re expecting you.”

“All right,” I say as if this is the most normal thing in the world.

“See you then.”

The next day I drive my rental car through the gate of Universal Studios and walk to soundstage 22, where a smiling young lady with a clipboard is waiting.

I say, tossing it off casually: “Mr. Cronyn is expecting me.”

“Oh, yes, David,” she says. “He said you should meet him in his trailer.”

A Hollywood trailer. As we approach I see him, through the screen door, standing up to greet me, tossing aside a Robertson Davies novel.

“Come on in,” he says. “Take a seat and tell me about yourself. Jessie ought to be here in a second. She’d come to lunch with us but she has to go back and film.”

While I’m telling Hume Cronyn about myself, the door opens and I instinctively rise. Jessica Tandy is walking in. Luminous, with swept-back white hair and porcelain skin and Blue-Willow-China eyes, the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen. The original Blanche Dubois. The woman who was lifted up onstage by Marlon Brando (“*We’ve had this date with each other from the beginning!*”) every night for two years in one of the greatest of American plays. She seems the most striking woman I’ve ever seen.

“So,” says Jessica Tandy to me, not quite suppressing a smile, “you’re the young man whose life we changed. Tell me about it.”

And so I did.

And they were both *very, very nice*.

And Hume did take me to lunch at the commissary.

And I did indeed pitch my idea to the head of Universal that afternoon.

And I got the job.

And as I drove out of the studio gate that pellucid afternoon, I felt as if nothing bad could ever happen to me. If something bad ever did happen, it wouldn’t matter very much.

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