

CARNABY STREET AND ME

I was not a spectacular law student. Only by inverting the pyramid could I say I graduated near the top of my class. Every time I tried to leave the prestigious institution, some faculty member would drag me back. It was as if they couldn't admit they had made a mistake. While others were studying for their finals and sequestering library books to deprive their classmates of access to the same, I was centuries away in the world of Thomas à Becket, Richard the Third, and Henry the Fifth. I even wrote a screenplay based on Jospheine Tey's wonderful novel, *The Daughter of Time*, in which a hospital-bound detective rehabilitates Richard Plantagenet while instilling in me a lasting hatred of Thomas More, the pious Tudor hack who wrote the history Shakespeare used for his play. I called the script, *Never More*.

There followed a brief interlude in my native Brooklyn, where, in the belief I could turn my fecklessness into paid travel, I toiled half-heartedly in Manhattan and at JFK as a management trainee for a major now-defunct airline. A hellish commute hour ride on the subway inspired a furious letter to nobody, in which I revealed the specifics of my journey in appropriately revolting detail. At the urging of a good friend, who found my rage on the page hilarious, I tacked on "to whom" and "yours truly" and sent it off to *Playboy*. A week later, at their request, I was on my way to Chicago for an interview as the prospective editor of their puerile joke page. Their glowing description of me as one of the "most qualified candidates" they could find made me curious about the alleged competition. The interview over lunch went well, but when I returned to New York and sat for their required psychological test, administered by a Dr. Wasserman, what they wanted from employees was soon painfully obvious. The first part was a long list of either/ors - for example, would I rather be a football player or ballet dancer. Duh. Halfway through, I tossed in the towel and proceeded to interpret the Rorschach blots so as to guarantee me not an editorial job, but to make me a shoe-in for a flight over the cuckoo's nest.

A few months later found me on the last student ship to England, determined to write stage plays - albeit I had never written one - and hoping to meet Samuel Johnson. Among all the possible forms of written expression, I had determined that the stage play, being constricted by time and space, was the most difficult. This, to me, was a good reason. No wonder I wasn't a fit for law school. The pigeon that dumped its greeting on me from the rafters of Victoria Station was an omen I interpreted for the best.

One Sunday morning, while playing in the weekly pick-up game of softball in Hyde Park with other expats and American visitors, I overheard someone on the first base sideline mention he was in London looking for plays. As I waited for my turn at bat, I introduced myself and asked if he would like to see *Never More*. Alexander Cohen - the Broadway mega-impresario - replied, "Sure. Drop it off at my office." I did better than

that. I jumped on my motorcycle and it was in his hands within twenty minutes. Which resulted in my getting a contract to write a play for him.

Over a Soho lunch with his angel, Julie Dougherty, I unveiled my project. It being 1968, and having toured the remains of the University of Paris at Vincennes, I suggested a play about a student revolt in America. This got me her enthusiastic concurrence and a seventy-five pounds advance. Which I promptly spent on a bespoke cord suit and boots. Which did not live up to their obligation to me to help me complete the play. Or even begin it. The deadline was history when I sheepishly submitted my manuscript, entitled *A Little Touch of Harry. Henry the Fifth*, Act Four, Scene One. The plot centered around a janitor's strike at a well-known American university, instigated by a somewhat lax law student. As we settled into our seats at the same charming Italian restaurant that had witnessed our contract, the gracious and forgiving Ms Dougherty handed me her reader's report on my play. She sat in silence while I read. Her reader said *Harry* was a very risky piece, but she would love to see it staged. She went on to remark that it was the best play she'd read in the three years she'd been working for her. Surprised and pleased, I looked up at the woman who was on the verge of becoming my angel. Who said, "You should be very proud, Richard. She's never given me a report like this." And then, "I read it. I didn't understand a word."

So much for *A Little Touch of Harry*. (Note: The janitors at that university did successfully strike in 1984.)

I was twenty-six. My race with Shakespeare to get to thirty-eight first had just begun. I decided to try writing a comedy. After all, the people at *Playboy* had found me a scream. So, I wrote one called *Miniver Cheevy*. He of "Miniver Cheevy, child of scorn". The poem by Edward Arlington Robinson. My mother was in London at the time. She read it. Her comment didn't quite measure up to that of Ms. Dougherty's reader: "Why don't you write a comedy."

Undaunted, I proceeded to write five more plays in the next five years. Two were self-produced at the Little Theater in St. Martin's Lane. One of these was the aforementioned *Cheevy*. The other was entitled *Doors*: an adaptation of Joseph Conrad's short story, "The Secret Sharer", and "The Rubaiyat of OMar Khayyam". The latter was performed by two talented young members of the Royal Ballet and directed by the Ballet Mistress of the same. I also adapted a Conrad novel, but it would have to stay under wraps until the fiftieth anniversary of his death in 1973, when it would quietly slip into the public domain. It is still under wraps, awaiting even the slightest show of interest.

London in those days was The Place to Be. And not just because it and Carnaby Street swung like a pendulum do. It was what Dodge City might have been had you traded cattle and gunslingers for the creative arts. Fringe theatre was in its heyday. A number of pubs had adapted back rooms to host new plays. I believe Sam Shepherd got his start at a pub in Islington. At the Roundhouse Theatre, I saw *Cirque du Soleil* when they were a small company of gimmickless acrobats, *Joseph and the Amazing*

Technicolor Dreamcoat as a one-act play, and rubbed shoulders with Peter Sellers at the bar. I saw Paul Scofield in, I think, *The Tempest*. It cost one pound to sit in the clouds at the Old Vic.

And it wasn't just theatre. I saw the Beatles play on the roof of a building near Piccadilly Circus. The Rolling Stones at a pub on Eel Pie Island. I heard Creedence Clearwater at the Albert Hall. Carol King and James Taylor in concert on the South Bank. Georgie Fame and Alan Price. Fifty pence to sit behind Andre Previn's London Symphony or the Philharmonic at the Royal Festival Hall, where the airy cafeteria overlooking the Thames served as my office. And a major source of my social life.

Opportunities in the arts were there for the taking. No doors were closed to a knock. As I was understandably interested in finding out how plays came to life, I asked Tony Richardson, who was directing *I, Claudius*, with David Warner and Warren Clarke, if I could attend rehearsals and gofer. He agreed. So did Jonathan Miller, who was directing *The Tempest* at the Blackfriars Theatre, when I knocked on the door of his house in Chalk Farm. Michael Rudman, the director of the Hampstead Theatre Club and later director of the award-winning *The Changing Room* at the Long Wharf in New Haven, Connecticut, was my tennis partner.

Having one day made an appointment with Frank Dunlop, the director of the Young Vic, just across the road from the Old Vic, south of the Thames, I arrived early and paid a needed visit to the loo. A dozen urinals stood in a long row along one wall. Seeing someone at the far end, I quite naturally secured the one closest to the door. Maybe it was the silence that induced me to inanely ask my loo-mate if he knew where I could find Frank Dunlop. He smiled. "You're talking to him." He never did any of my plays, but he was never too busy for a talk.

Diana Rigg was appearing in Tom Stoppard's *Jumpers* at the Old Vic, and I was muchly impressed with the play, Michael Hordren, and Ms Rigg's clothes-less torso as it swayed gently to-and-fro on a swing. I rang her up at her home - nobody seemed to have an unlisted number - and asked if she would like to read *Brandy Alexander*, my play about the Great one's callous seduction and abandonment of Stateira, the wife of the Persian Emperor, Darius. Her yes was no "I'll read it and get back to you sometime this century." A week later, she was offering me her comments over pints of bitter as we leaned against a bar in a pub. A very large person is Ms Rigg. Both physically and personally. She liked the play and the part, but it never went further than that. A fringe group wanted to take *Brandy* to the Edinburgh Festival but disbanded before anything came of it.

Lest anyone get the impression I was living the high life, I must disabuse them. Although my work received quite a bit of praise from readers, including one at the National Theatre, my closest run-in with success was with a screenplay! One I had dashed off on a wager with an acquaintance after we had attended a double feature of gory Hammer films. The bet was I could write a horror movie in three days. Thus was

born *Drink the Blood of Hitler*, a spoof about vampires evicting Hitler from the castle at Berchtesgaden. I immediately sent this masterpiece off to Hammer and within a few days had received an offer of thirty-five hundred pounds, if! If I would make some changes they wanted. Which I didn't. Couldn't or wouldn't. I can't recall why. Maybe from hitting my head against a wall. Maybe I was frightened or horrified they might actually do it!

I did not have much money. Enough to get me into the country but not to stay as long as I did. If you didn't have a work permit, foreigners could not find a paying job. I knew something about carpentry and eked out a living occasionally doing that. My digs were hardly palatial, and every time I took off for the continent, when I came back, I had to find another place to live. Usually from a notice board outside a tobacconist's that also served to advertise an amazing variety of ladies of the night. In a way, having to move about gave me the opportunity to get to know a number of London's very varied neighborhoods. Including St. Katherine's Dock, hard by the Tower of London, where for nine months, I occupied the captain's cabin of an ancient Thames sailing barge.

I lived on little and needed less. At a time when I was residing at Earl's Court, in southwest London, I took a young lady I'd recently met to dine at the Prospect of Whitby, a noted pub in Wapping, at the other end of town. It was our first date. Getting out of the pub too late for the tube, which closed at around eleven, we slowly made our way across London on foot. It was a balmy night, and we blissfully navigated the empty, cobblestoned streets in the company of ghosts of its illustrious and sordid history, arriving back in Earl's Court at three a.m. Her parents weren't quite as happy.

After seven years of this life, I stopped writing plays. Shakespeare's tail lights had passed out of sight long before. The last play I wrote was about Benedict Arnold: *Benedict Who?* That's what it became, because while it was originally called *Bene Dicta* - ha ha - nobody seemed to know who he was. One of the characters was based on a dosser who hung out at various places in Hampstead - where I was then living - and could always be seen talking to himself. Restaurants. Laundromats. Street corners. From avoiding him, I became curious. When I could, I would write down his babblings on the margins of newspapers, anything that was handy. He was pathetic, yet fascinating. And no dummy. From what he said, it was clear that he lived in a world of his own. At a casual vegetarian restaurant named Cyrano's, it was his wont to stand in the middle of the floor, wearing a Columbo-like, rumpled trench coat, oblivious to others, and imploring a large, hung painting of Roxanne not to be put off by his poverty. I didn't credit him for his monologues, which were probably the best thing about the play. It was only fitting in a way, because one of the main reasons I stopped writing was, like the dosser, I was hearing only myself. I gave the script to a director friend of mine, David Myles, threw a dart at a map of Greece, and left for the island of Paros.

Should this brief introduction arouse any interest in my subsequent adventures among the Hellenes, as the author I can highly recommend the mostly non-fictional *Paradise Besieged* and the nominally fictitious *Stranger on the Earth*, both self-published and available through contacting me. Of *Paradise Besieged*, I am perversely proud to say that one local publisher rejected it with the comment, “Interesting, but I could never publish a book with such sophomoric humor.” Which, incidentally, is what I’ve been told is one of the charms of this well-received, serious book. I guess *Playboy* had me right.