Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Why the Hell Do I Do This?

Eric · Thursday, November 26th, 2015

Why the hell do I write this blog? Why have written one called "rules rules" since 2005? Why have I written another one, "e-travels with e. rules blog," since 2002, with stories as ancient as 1970?

What for? It's not like I get a lot of feedback, positive or negative. Does anyone read it? Does anyone care? And if they do, or if they don't, or if I don't know they do, does a tree exist in a forest if no one can see it?

Good questions, eh? Why? What for, Trules?



Nick Ray, "the Rebel with a cause"

Now a long time ago, in 1977, on East 15th Street in New Yawk City, at the Lee Strasberg Institute, I took a filmmaking class with the notorious filmmaker of *Rebel Without A Cause*, Nicholas Ray. This was at the very end of Nick's bigger-than-life, life, during the same time that German filmmaker, Wim Wenders, was making a documentary film on Nick called *Lightning Over Water*. Nick was a rebel celebrity at the Strasberg Institute, and he lived up to his billing by wearing a black eye patch over one eye, coming into class shakily with his fly unzipped, and overall, just being one cantankerous, unpredictable teacher/sonofabitch.

I wrangled with Nick all the time. We were like oil and an unzipped fly. But this one wrangle I've always remembered. Nick pronounced:

"There's just *one* emotion you can't show on the screen. It's pity. The audience has no tolerance for it. It makes the character who pities him or herself completely unlikeable. Just forget it."

"But why?" I argued. "It's just as legitimate an emotion as any other. And we all pity ourselves at one time or another."

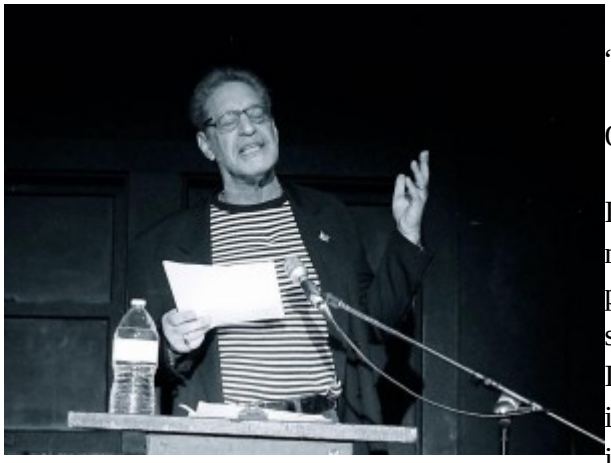
"Well, keep it to yourself – and off the screen".

Nick was blunt, antagonistic, and I always remembered the argument. Now, many years later, I, sort of reluctantly, agree with him. Forget the pity… on the screen, on the stage… and in the blog.

So… this post is not a self pity party. "Poor me, nobody reads my blogs. I write and write and I'm unrecognized, unappreciated, and just about, fucking unknown."

But no, don't feel sorry me. I do it because I want to.

"But why, Trules? Why keep writing? You have no book. You don't want to submit your work anymore because your skin's too thin for rejection. You're not on 'The Moth', or 'This American Life', or KCRW's 'Unfictional'. Sure, you blog for the Huffington Post and The Cultural Weekly, and you just did your first TEDx Talk. But it wasn't a real, full-on TED Talk; it was only TEDx."



Trules TEDxing

"So… what is it, Trules?"

Ok, ok, here it is:

I like doing it. I like writing. I like expressing myself, discovering myself, on the page. I'm a public kinda person. I need an audience…. on a stage, in the classroom, on the world wide web. I'm a complicated, contradictory kinda guy. Moon in Scorpio. Emotions run deep. I like digging into… myself… into life… and figuring out how things work. What makes people tick. Finding weaknesses, wounds, scars… that make for…vulnerability, insight, and universal stories. Like the ancient Greeks, like Shakespeare, like Williams, O'Neill, and Miller, our 3 greatest American playwrights, I try to mine my personal history to make art out of the fabric of my life. I try not to be narcissistic to a fault. I try to make the audience the hero of my story, not myself. What can the reader see, learn, appreciate about the arc and understanding of my story. In my neurotic microcosm, I hope to find a universal macrocosm. If I write true enough, naked enough, maybe I can do that. Sometimes.

And then… there's the occasional miracle of a response. From a reader, from a student, from a member of the audience.

Like this: an email that I received from a passionate Romanian student who I taught in Bucharest on my Fulbright grant in 2010:

"Hello, dear Trules! I am Felix, your former student from Romania. I'm writing to tell you that two years ago I started my own acting school. Yes. You told us : 'If you build it they will come,' so I did. And guess what? I've had thousands of students. I am living the dream, Trules, and on Friday, I will be leaving for Transylvania with 15 students where we will be doing the monologue

workshop that you taught us. I would like to thank you for that experience; it was one of the most profitable experiences of my life. I'll send you pictures and feedback. Thank you again, Trules. Love, Felix."



Young Felix, who knew?

Wow! "Thousands of students"? *Incroyable!* Hard to believe. But it's also… just another demonstration of… the power of art. Of putting your work out there without any guaranties. You plant a seed, you never know what will grow. Sometimes a weed. Sometimes a strong tree or a beautiful flower.

Then there's this young man named Dave Higgins. He studied with Milton Katselas over 25 years ago at the Beverly Hills Playhouse, during the time that I was producing solo shows all around town, including at the Beverly Hills Playhouse. Well, just the other day, in October, 2015, I get a Facebook message from a well-known Irish actor in LA named Morlan Higgins:

"About 25 years ago, you produced an evening of solo shows at Theatre/Theater. You were kind enough to include my solo piece about becoming a father called "GrandFathersCatfish." At the time I was still using my given name, Dave Higgins. Long ago I had to change it to Morlan Higgins. Anyway, that's how I met you and became familiar with your work. You and I have basically had no other contact until I started FaceBooking about a year ago. But I read about you occasionally and some of your projects and always thought of you gratefully and fondly."



Morlan Higgins

Wow again! Good ol' Dave Higgins had become "Morlan" Higgins, had put on about 30 pounds, grown bushy Irish muttonchops, and won numerous acting awards at the Fountain Theatre for roles he played in numerous LA first-time productions of the plays of the great South African playwright, Athol Fugard.

A few days later, Morlan and I meet at Fix, the trendy Echo Park coffee shop right down the hill from me, and we chew the fat of the last 25 years. We have many friends in common; I just never knew. He turns me on to "The Gloaming", the best Irish traditional music group on the planet who I run out to see at USC the next weekend. The next week we go to the 25th anniversary tribute to Stephen Sachs, the co-founder of Fountain Theatre. And last night, I went to see him in "Uncle Vanya" at the Antaeus Theatre Company in Noho.

At Fix Morlan tells me,

"I read your blog, man. About your Indonesian wife, and your new Indonesian nephew. I read most of your stuff; I just never leave any comments. But you know, many times, I think to myself, 'I could have written that. I could have said that. Exactly like that." Then Morlan takes a breath, fixes

his soulful Irish eyes on me, and says, "Know that you make a difference, man."

It's a beautiful re-connection. Through time. And through art.

What I mean to say is that you just never know – where the stone you skip might land. I once wrote a blog post called "Ripples in the Pond." It was about the film *It's a Wonderful Life*, the 1946 American Christmas classic directed by Frank Capra, based on the short story "The Greatest Gift," which Phillip Van Doren wrote in 1939 and published privately in 1945. Ever hear of it?

In 2013, one of my USC solo performance students, Tommy Fleming, wrote a monologue about his deep relationship with the movie and how it saved his life when a high school friend committed suicide and he was thinking of doing the same. He didn't do it because of what Clarence, the Angel, told George Bailey, the beleaguered protagonist played by Jimmy Stewart, in the film:

> "Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives. When he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?"



Words of wisdom from Clarence to George

And because of those words, George Bailey doesn't throw himself off the bridge of life in 1946. And because of those words, Tommy Fleming doesn't cut his wrists in his high school bathtub in 2013.

And in 2014, Jordan Merimee, another student in the same 2012 solo class, gives the USC School of Dramatic Arts commencement address, and he tells how Tommy Fleming's story that night in 2012 saved the life of one of his, Jordan's, USC friends who was feeling suicidal the night she came to the solo performances. And he tells all his fellow graduating students and all their parents about the power of the class, the power of the theater, the power of stories, and about the power of art.

A few days after the graduation ceremony I write my blog post about it, and a few days after that my personal USC internist shares my blog post with all his residents and interns at LA County-USC Hospital. He requires them to read it…

… and so on and so on… down the long, unpredictable road… of life.

… one ripple, one post, one student, one human being, at a time.

Art can change the world.

And that's….

…why I write.

Happy Turkey Day! Even in this big bad, complicated world, there's plenty to be grateful for…..

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