Cultural Daily

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Itinerant Days at NYC's Hotel Woodward

Eric · Wednesday, September 21st, 2016

The Hotel Woodward. 55th and Broadway. New York City. 1977. I lived there on the 7th floor. Around the corner from the famous Carnegie Deli on 55th and Seventh. Best corned beef on rye in Manhattan. Piled half a foot high. Better than the Stage Deli's 2 blocks down Seventh Avenue, better than Ratner's on Delancey Street, better even than The Second Avenue Deli in the East Village.

Two blocks uptown from The Woodward was the temple of classical music itself, Carnegie Hall, at 57th Street and 7th Avenue, with the still-operative Carnegie Cinema, where you could catch a classic double feature seven nights a week. Right on 55th Street and 7th was the IRT Double R subway, and across the street, on the west side of Broadway and 55th was JoJo's, one of the best jazz dance studios in New York, where I took classes a few nights a week, one time with Gregory Hines, until JoJo asked me to dance in his upcoming Broadway show, so naturally I quit.

Also, right there on Broadway, every Friday afternoon, came the Hare Krishnas…

…marching downtown from Central Park in their bright saffron and orange robes, tintanabulant finger cymbals keeping rhythm for their hypnotizing *"Hare Krishna, Hare Krisha, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare…"*

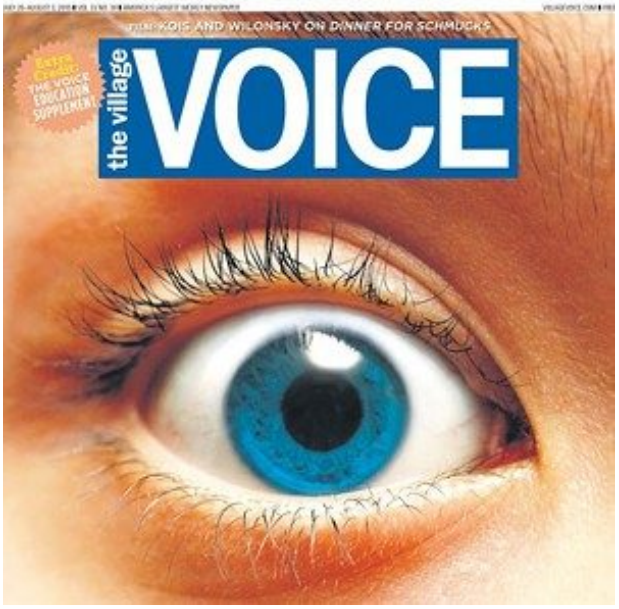
The neighborhood was in transition in the late 70s. It was just uptown from the Times Square Broadway show district which had replaced the automotive industry after the Great Depression, but it was still years before Mayor Rudy Guliani would sanitize Manhattan, making it safer for women to walk at night, but also homogenizing its neighborhoods into one all-purpose, residential-commercial-tourist zone. We still had Hell's Kitchen in 1977, the funky, drug-ridden East Village, Germantown on the Upper East Side, Italians still living in Little Italy, and meat-packing warehouses instead of galleries in the 20s on the Westside, before the immaculate High Line was built along the Hudson River.

I had just arrived back in my native New York on the first day of Spring, 1977, at age 29, after unpredictably becoming a modern dancer and artist in Chicago over the previous seven years.

I had it in my mind that I would stop in New York for a few weeks before I booked myself a one way flight to Europe to become an independent artist-choreographer. In retrospect, it was probably just an unrealistic youthful fantasy, but then again, there was then, and is still now, no ceiling on

the dreams of the young.

I arrived in the Big Apple with only one large suitcase. I was not yet through a rough separation crisis from my parents who still lived on Long Island, so I was hell bent on making it on my own. I think I stayed the first night in a cheap hotel off of Washington Square Park, but it was a little pricey, and I knew that my small savings from making a hundred dollars a week as a modern dancer would not last long there.



So I picked up a free copy of the Village Voice ….and there it was, in the classifieds, an ad for a room in the residential Hotel Woodward at 55th and Broadway – for $55 a week! I moved in the next day into room 710, and I didn't leave until two years later, when I actually did go to Europe, but not at all as I expected.

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In 1977, the formerly elegant Hotel Woodward was clearly on a downward slide. Having been constructed at the turn of the 20th century as an elegant Beaux Arts, Parisian-style hotel, it had already been through many evolutions by the time of the Depression. Bought and reneged on by Henry Ford, it later became home to the likes of Hollywood personalities Art Carney, Bela Legosi, and Jayne Mansfield. It had magic. And history.

But by the time I got there in the late 70s, the Woodward was clearly nothing more than a seedy residential hotel with a half way house for ex cons on the 2nd floor.

There was not much glamour left, except for the fabulous Chin-Ya Japanese restaurant in the lobby, which could still attract late night, wayward and glamorous patrons like Simon & Garfunkle, Mick Jagger, Halston, Liza, and many others who would come in after hours for the delicious sushi and free-flowing sake. The ex-cons had curfew at midnight, but the rest of us could stay 'til 5 am.

In 1977, I was still brash and young. I had no idea how I would manage to pay the $55/week rent, but I was also resourceful, if not to say, a little criminal when I had to be. I soon invented a little scheme that became quite reliable.

As many of you probably know, because it has since become an institution, there is the half price TKTS booth on 47th and Broadway.

There you can wait on a line and buy half price tickets to same day Broadway shows, which otherwise would be astronomically over- priced for most of us average Joes. Well, in 1977, the TKTS booth was still in its infancy, and it was certainly not prepared for the likes of a scoundrel like yours Trulesly… who would wait on line, perhaps five days a week, and purchase 2-20 tickets at a time. There was no limit back in the day.

Then I would go to the show I had purchased tickets for, dressed very nicely of course, shirt and

the one tie I owned, and I would stand in front of the theater at 7:30 pm, half an hour before show time, and I would announce in my well-educated, non-scalper voice:

“Can anyone use 2 extra seats? My girlfriend just cancelled on me.”

And there I’d stand, looking sad and abandoned.
And sure enough, particularly because I picked the most popular shows at the best times, someone would inevitably purchase my tickets… at full price, the very ones I had purchased at half price that very afternoon. And if it was a Sunday matinee at *The Wiz*, for example, I could do this say…

10 times, selling 10 pairs of tickets in 20 minutes, and I could walk off with say… a $300 profit for the day… more than enough for my $55/week rent at The Woodward.
Of course, sometimes I would strike out and be stuck with the unsold tickets, having to absorb the loss, very painful indeed, but I was already an artist-businessman, who learned to take risks early in life.
Eventually though, the theater managers got wise to me. Especially the dude at The Wiz. He kept wondering, and then doubting, how many girlfriends I had, and just how many cancellations they made on me. He finally contacted the TKTS booth… and guess what happened? They started to stamp the back of the tickets “Half Price Tickets, Not for Resale,” which effectively killed my business very quickly. But for most of those two Hotel Woodward years, my scheme worked like a charm. Not something I’m very proud of at this time in my life, but hey, how many people can say that they, personally, effected and changed the Broadway ticket industry?

*

One night in 1977, after riding the 8th Avenue AA train back home from a gig to The Woodward, still dressed in my clown mufti and makeup as “Gino Cumeezi,” I was clowning my way east along West 54th…

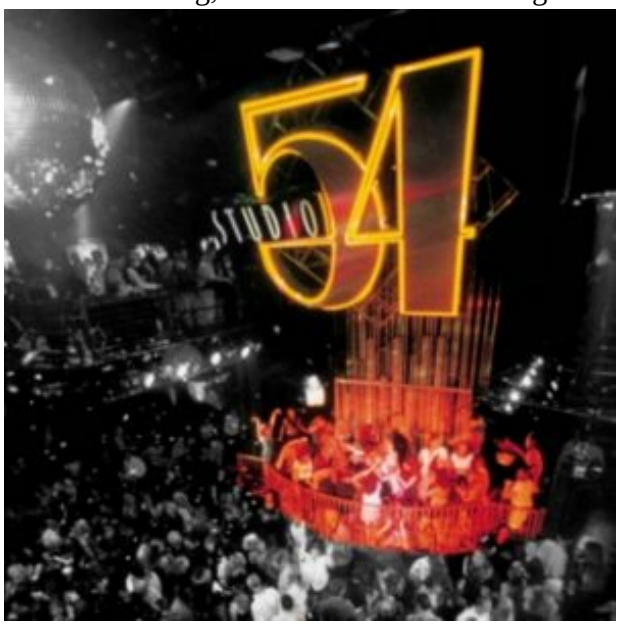
…when I suddenly noticed a large crowd on the downtown side of the street between Broadway and 8th Avenue. I… I mean, Gino, sauntered up, stood behind the anxious and bustling crowd, all hoping to be chosen by the perfectly-coifed bouncer/doorman… when all of a sudden, the crowd… simply parted… making way for *my*, I mean, *Gino’s*… grand Red Sea entrance.
I… I mean Gino, clumsily and buffoonishly made my way through the desperate crowd, theatrically kissing the beautifully-coifed doorman, comically shaking as many hands of the wannabe revelers as I could … and kissing all the babies in sight. Ok, ok, no babies… but… I was… in! Studio fricking 54!
That’s right! Right around the corner from the Hotel Woodward, in 1977, was Studio 54… where I… was a big hit, daddio! The crowd… loved me. I mean, loved Gino. They shook my hand, pinched my ass, lifted me in their arms, offered me

cocaine (which of course clowns never use), and generally had their way with me. By the time I left an hour later, totally exhausted and feeling like a squeezed-out dish rag soaked with sweat, the doorman, who gave me his card… his name was “Lynn” and his card read “model/doorman”…he told me “to come back… any time.” Which I did, I mean Gino did, whenever I/he had the energy and will power to withstand the assault of the late night and coked-out dance club partiers.

Then, on another balmy summer night, maybe a month later, I was again walking home late from the same 8th Avenue subway, past the same 54th street, now infamous, night club. But this time without any clown mufti or makeup. I paused on the uptown side of the street, beyond the pushing throng of wannabe partiers waiting to be chosen by the outstretched finger of red-haired Lynn, when…. out of a story book, at least in my memory, the eagle-eyed “model/doorman”, points beyond the crowd… across the street… in my direction. The crowd parts. I look around for the lucky person who’s been chosen, when I discover that… it’s… me. Apparently, Lynn’s x-ray eyes could see right through Gino’s white face clown makeup to identify the mere mortal underneath… *moi*.

I walk through the crowd, very modestly and casually dressed, much to the consternation of all the decked out wannabe disco-ers, and Lynn… gives me a wink. I wink back… and from that night on, I become a very popular man about town. It seems like everyone I know in New York, and many people who I’ve just met, find a way to wangle their way up to my tiny and seedy room at The Hotel Woodward… so I can walk them over and in… to the massively exclusive… Studio 54. For a lifelong outsider like me, this is a strange experience indeed. To be welcome at a trendy and famous club… to be suddenly popular… on the wish list of any and all of New York’s aspiring social acolytes… this is simply beyond anything I’ve ever known.

But… I ‘m not like Woody Allen… refusing to be a member of any club that is idiotic enough to accept me. Instead, most nights, usually at 11 pm, when the club first opens and long before the likes of Mick or Liza or Jack make their celebrity appearances, I just show up, *sans* makeup, with a girl of my choice, to disco dance the night away. Or at least… the first hour away… when we have the whole dance floor… almost entirely to ourselves… disco lights flashing, shiny Mylar streamers falling, Donna Summer throbbing on the blasting pre-techno sound system.



Then… usually by half past midnight, when the night is still young, while the crowds are first lining up in throngs in front of 254 W. 54th Street, I am usually tucked under the covers in Room 710, fast and happily asleep, dreaming my iconoclastic way into my unknown future… still three years before Studio 54’s owners, Steve Rubell and Ian Shrager, my “pals”, are arrested for skimming 2.5 million dollars off the top of the door, and the club closes, cold turkey.

My room, the infamous 710, is also the home of the “Cumeezi Bozo Ensemble, NYC’s Resident Clown Troupe.” Because… after running for Mayor of New York City in 1977, also as clown candidate, Gino Cumeezi, and finishing “fifth out of 4 candidates”, I suddenly have a dubious reputation, which… I foolishly, but practically, decide to parlay into teaching “clown classes” once a week at a small loft in downtown Soho.

Soon I have government grants and a 10 member clown company, whose odd and diverse members

would take the tiny old Woodward elevator… up to the 7th floor… where they would enter my almost as tiny room, until… half an hour later, they would individually and collectively… re-emerge… as fully costumed clowns… in full mufti and makeup.

It was a hoot. And the Indian desk team downstairs, of Prakash and the obese identical twins, Cindy and Mindy, who operated the antiquated, still-wired switchboard, loved us all.

One hot, sweltering summer night, midway through my sojourn at The Woodward, I decided to sleep with my door open. Not chained as I usually did… but *open* open. I needed more air to circulate from the almost bricked-in center window through the front hallway door. For some dumb reason, probably my clown-like naiveté and innocence, I never thought twice about doing it. It was *so* hot. I needed… some air. So… I left the door… open… no chain.

The next morning, I can not find my wallet… which I am positive I left on my night stand, right next to my seedy bed. I get up to look around. And sure enough, there it is… on the floor… upside down, just inside the *now-closed*, front door. Strange…. I pick it up. Look at it. It's empty of about $60 in cash. Otherwise, it's fine… unmolested.

Shit! Someone came into my room… right through my open, unlocked door… walked up to my night stand about 6 inches from my sleeping, idiotic head… and snatched my wallet. Emptied it of its cash… thank you very much… and left it on the floor… right inside the door… of room 710. They… didn't slit my throat… strangle or kill me… why would they? I gave them easy access to 60 bucks… and they took it. No questions asked. No blood or body count necessary.

The next night? Do I barricade the door? Call the police? Inform the hotel staff? Of course… not. I do the same exact thing. Leave my door open, unchained, to get the same circulating air… on another sweltering night.

I think, "Lightning can't strike the same place two nights in a row, right?"

Wrong. It does. The same pilferer comes into my room – again – creeps through the open door…. right up to my nightstand – while I'm fast asleep – and snatches my wallet – again! This time, 40 bucks gone. And the wallet the next morning? Left on the floor, again. Upside down, inside the room, just near the *closed* door, this time with a little thank you note! "Merci beaucoup, *putz!"*

Ok, no thank you note. Just the second rifled wallet!

But p*utz* indeed! Two nights in a row. Robbed! 6 inches from my frigging, sleeping head! Yep! That's right! Open door Trules….

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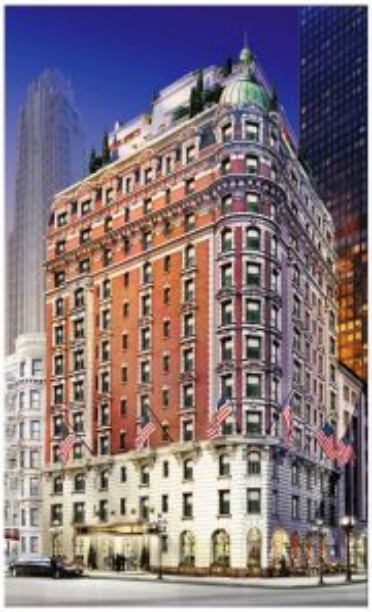
But… that was the beautiful thing about The Hotel Woodward in 1977.



Or at least the beautiful thing about 29 year old me staying at the Hotel Woodward. I was young. Innocent. Footloose and fancy free. Danger and consequences bounced off me like rubber bullets off Broadway barns. I was a clown. A professional fool. I was… naive and trusting …so much so that I left my sweltering hotel room door open all frigging night long. My hotel with the second floor full of ex-cons.

Yet somehow… I survived. Day to day. Minute to minute. Clowning and improvising on 6th Avenue. Making people laugh. I didn't even pass a hat. "Free Public Laughs", that's what I called it. What I did. What my company did.

I survived… week to week… re-selling Broadway show tickets… to be able to pay the rent… $55/week… until some Dutch impresario saw a little story about The Cumeezis in *The New York Times*, and he invited the whole clown company to a Rotterdam arts festival where we were hired as the roving, improvisational ambassadors. We shook hands. Kissed and scared babies. We went to haunted castles , moonlit beaches whose names we couldn't even pronounce. We appeared on tv shows, in print media all over Holland…. but hey… that's another story altogether.

Now erstwhile Hotel Woodward is the commercialized and quite ordinary Dream Hotel, with its

neon fish tanks and high prices… and… the good ol' days are gone forever. I've grown up. I'm not a professional clown anymore. I have a wife, and now a child at age 69. I'm responsible, adult, burdened and beleaguered… just like the rest of us. Although, anyone who knows me, will tell you that I still do a lot of ridiculous and foolish things.

But here's a toast to… The Hotel Woodward. And to youth, and to beauty, and to innocence… and to… clowns.

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