

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Losing My Old Voice to Find A New One

Eric · Wednesday, May 27th, 2015

Just about everyone who knows me knows I have a big mouth. Not just the size of it (I once fit 12 eggs into it), but also my compulsion to say whatever I want.



Caricature of Trules by Ernesto Lopez

Because of it, I have burned far too many bridges, hurt far too many feelings, and stepped on far too many toes. More than I would ever like to admit. But... I like to see how far I can go... to get away with something... to fight for “the right”... right up to the precipice... before I pull back... without injury or damage... to myself or the other party... which I’m able to do... 99 out of a hundred times. But it’s risky business. A confrontational way of living. I should know better. I shouldn’t have to do it anymore. I’m well into my seventh decade on the planet. C’mon Trules, grow up!

Yet... it wasn’t always that way...

You see, I learned, as a child, that... uncommon “honesty” and relentless “truth”... were the family moral pinnacles that were crammed down my throat by Ma & Pa Trules when I was a vulnerable and absorbent young lad on Long Island, New Yawk. Joe and Roz, both first generation American Jews, had their own values, their own compulsions, which did everything to make me into a very “good boy” who did all the “right things,” who said all the “right things”... growing up on the academic conveyor belt of suburban Americana in the post war 1950s.



I was well behaved to a fault, cripplingly repressed, socially awkward, yet I was expected to become “their son, the doctah,” or at least, “their son, the lawyah,” when I eventually “grew up” and conformed to the norm. But then something went... very haywire...



The 60s, man.

Midway through my sophomore year, 1966, I caught the cultural tidal wave, driven by The Beatles, Dylan, sex, drugs, and rock ‘n roll, and “I turned on, tuned in, and dropped out,” just the way Timothy Leary had preached. It was completely mind-blowing and... revelatory. It made me question everything I had grown up believing: my parents, the government, money, materialism, capitalism, racial discrimination, sexual repression, authority... “What are you rebelling against, son?” “Whadda you got?” I dropped Calculus 3 times and Physics twice. Nah, I ain’t gonna become a doctor. I took Modern Art: Picasso, Pollock, Matisse, Kandinsky, wild color, abandon, freedom of expression.



Kandinsky, Sketch for Composition VII, 1913

I studied jazz with Archie Shepp: kinda blue, cool jazz with Miles, “my favorite things” with Coltrane, the honks and squeaks of unpredictable improvisation.



John Coltrane, My Favorite Things, Album Cover

Everything I had no training in or experience with. Everything I hungered for but didn’t know how or where to find.

I graduated SUNY Buffalo in 1969 and blew off my graduation. I bought a Honda 350 and reluctantly moved back into my parents’ suburban house for a month, back into my childhood bedroom, painted with cowboy corrals and bucking broncos. Not a good fit. I got into two motorcycle accidents, smoked dope behind closed doors, and no doubt, drove my parents nearly insane. I finally moved out at age 22. To Bed-Stuy, in Brooklyn, near Pratt Institute, an art school where I modeled naked for drawing classes, sold blond hashish wrapped in chocolate tins imported from Britain, and drove a taxi cab, following racing ambulances up and down the streets of Manhattan. I was still a virgin and still cripplingly repressed. But I was also a volcano ready to erupt.

Then... I somehow answered an ad in the *Village Voice*:

“Actors wanted for ongoing workshop in self-expression and creativity. No experience necessary.”

Wow. That was it. That was me. “No experience.” But hungry as hell.

I called the number. 40 times. No answer. It was still years before the answering machine. Or... this guy... Scott Kelman was his name... just never used one. Finally, one morning about 4am, after a few too many beers, I called for the 41st time. He picked up. Gravel voice from the back of a bar room.

“Yeah, whataya want?”

“Uh, sorry to call you so late, but I’m calling about the workshop.”

“Come Saturday. 10 o’clock.” He gave me the address and hung up.

Saturday morning. I was there. I drove my 1964 blue-gray Pontiac Tempest over the Brooklyn Bridge, through the still-grungy Lower East Side, up the Bowery, to Broadway and Waverly Place, right between the East and West Villages.



Lower Broadway/Manhattan

I parked “the Wolf” right on Broadway, and climbed the steps into the loft’s barren rehearsal room. There, in front of me, were about 15 people, lying around the floor, moving about the space, making the weirdest sounds and movements I had ever heard in my life. “*Schwah! Hoo! Schwah! Hoo!*” What the fuck? I was shocked. What was I doing here? How was I going to manage? Sure, I had taken some yoga classes in college, so yeah, I better sit on the floor and do some yoga stretches...

A swarthy dark-skinned young man with a thick Middle Eastern accent came over to me.

“Are you a dancer?”

“Uh, me? No.”

“Looks like you’re doing some Graham stretches.”

(Who’s Graham?) “No, just some yoga stretches.”

He flashes me a toothy grin and says, “I’m Jacob. Who are you?”

“Uh... Eric.”

“Well, ‘uh, Eric’, why don’t we go out for some coffee after the workshop?”

“Uh, I drove my car here.”

Bigger smile. “Well, you can drive me home then.”

Riiight. His name is Jacob, and he’s an apprentice with the Joffrey Ballet, from Israel. I know what he wants, even though I have no sexual experience, but ok. I’m ok. But first, let’s see if I can get through this workshop.



Scott Kelman, photographer unknown

Little do I know that this is Scott Kelman's famous physical theater workshop, which he's developed over many years as a carnival barker, street hustler, and downtown New York theater maven. Me? I'm a blank slate. I don't know anything. I answered an ad in the *Village Voice*. But Scott says, after an hour of "schwah-ing" and "hoo-ing", "You're a diamond in the rough. You got a lot to learn, but I see potential."

In my first class! Maybe, with a lot of work, and all the desire in the world, I can learn to "schwah! hoo!" with the best of them: sexy Sally in black leotard and tights, tall, muscular Allegra who looks like a pale Super Woman with electric hair, Milagros, a beautiful, will-of-the-wisp Puerto Rican dancer, Larry, the pock-marked macro-biotic yogi.... this is the cast of characters who will soon become my new family.

After the workshop, as promised, Jacob tries to hitch a ride with me downtown to his tiny apartment on Sullivan Street in the West Village, in a building complex he manages in return for free rent. Mark comes with us, another friend of Jacob's, who he probably invites along to make me feel a little safer. We walk down the stairs, step outside into Saturday afternoon, and... my car is gone. Towed. Saturday morning parking. Did I read the goddam signs? Fuck, no. What does a suburban Long Island boy know about parking in "the City"? Nada. The three of us... take a cab to the tow company's lot... retrieve my Tempest for a fist full of dollars, and I drop them both off at Jacob's place... when he leaves me with a "Why don't we go over to La Mama on Wednesday? There's another workshop I want to show you."

And... he does. With his swarthy smile. And I meet Ellen Stewart, the "Mama" in La Mama, the small theater company and mecca for the entire downtown New York avant garde theater scene, on 4th Street in the East Village.



Ellen Stewart, "La Mama"

I meet the Plexus Company with Andy Robinson, who will become my colleague four decades later at USC. I meet ex-junkie, Daffi Nathanson, 6 foot 8 inches tall, and his feisty dancer wife, Norma, all of 4 feet 11 inches tall, and 2 weeks later, I move into their loft, "Om Zig," on Kenmore Street and the Bowery. It's funky... and "groovy"... and bohemian to the max, and perhaps, the very and only thing I need... to change... to shock me out of my somnambulant and conventional adolescence.

And so... I consciously allow Jacob to take me under his wing... but not into his bed... and I instantly become part of the downtown New York theater and art scene. I see Joe Chaikin's Open Theatre.



Joe Chaikin, Director
of The Open Theatre

Richard Schechner's "Dionysius in '69?" at the Performance Garage,

