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On Retirement from a Life in the Theater

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Tomorrow I'll pick up my final paycheck. It's my "last day of service" at the great University of Southern California, where I've taught in the School of Dramatic Arts for 31 years.

I started as a simple adjunct instructor with a single improv class, and I ended up improvising my way to becoming a full-time Associate Professor of Theater Practice. Non-tenured...but still impressive in my parents' eyes, and not anything I could have anticipated or imagined when I graduated college in 1969 with a degree in Frisbee.

That's almost 50 years ago... during which time I grew up, became an adult, became an artist, a modern dancer, a poet, a documentary filmmaker, a director and producer, a story teller, an educator, and most surprisingly... a professional clown. I hustled, hassled, worried, and fought my way to a career in the arts, in Chicago, in New York, and for the last 35 years, in Los Angeles. During that last...almost half century, I've had my share of successes and disappointments. I've won some awards and been ignored many times. I've had cancer and been lucky enough to survive it, along with many other, near-brushes with death. Fifteen years ago, I got married for the first time to an Indonesian woman 31 years younger than myself (anything magical about the number 31?). And even more recently, I adopted a son at age 68. Me, 68, not the son.



But tomorrow is my "termination date," after which I will no longer receive a salary, health care, life insurance, or any of the other many benefits I've taken for granted these last many decades. I'm throwing myself out of the academic nest, off the retirement cliff, to see if I have any wings left to fly. To see if I can create a "third act," you know, the last act of a contemporary play, after which the curtain comes down and the stage goes dark. I wonder how many more years I have left to live, and if I'll have enough money and ingenuity to thrive, to still live with some creativity, risk-taking, comfort, and grace. They didn't teach us about the "third act" in school. And by that, I don't mean the "third act" of a play.



"Life is what happens while you're waiting for your plans to work out." John Lennon, the iconoclastic Beatle and one of my childhood heroes, supposedly said that, but I'm convinced that he overheard it from a little old lady in Liverpool. In any event, I've certainly found it to be true. Because any plans I ever made... never really materialized. Yet along the way, by saying yes to the

opportunities that came my way, by following my gut, my needs, and my instincts, somehow... life has “worked out”. Then again, life has a way of doing that...“working out”...one way or another. Some times better than others. But almost always in ways you can never have predicted.

I’d like now to take a look back...on my unpredictable life, not via the full blown memoir route, but via the short-order “retirement” version...to make some sense out of it all...to thank some people and some circumstances...to give some context to this so-called “third act.” And to hopefully, do so in a way...that is not *all* about...myself.

I was born in “New Yawk” in the late, post-WW2, Baby Boom 1940s.



Me and my generation grew up in the Ike Eisenhower, buttoned-down 1950s, until we collectively erupted in the mid 1960s, into sex, drugs, and rock ‘n roll. The word “erupted” perfectly fits the needs of my childhood- adolescence personality, as I was too self-conscious and too repressed to ever take a dance step, sing a note, or do anything that I didn’t think would please my parents and make them proud. That’s why I think it’s ironic that I first became a modern dancer and a clown, two the most far-fetched and unimaginable careers this straight-laced, well-behaved young man could ever have stumbled into. But as I said, life has a sense of humor, and I had...the need. As apparently did...my whole generation.

I was supposed to become a New Yawk Jewish, “my son, the doctuh.” Unfortunately, along the way to that expectation, I dropped Calculus three times in college at the University of Buffalo, and physics twice. Amidst the sex, drugs, and rock ‘n roll of the late 60s (or at least the drugs and rock ‘n roll; as I was abysmally late to the sex part), I discovered that I didn’t want to become a doctor, that was someone else’s idea, and that I wanted instead to discover who the hell I was. The drugs helped, expanding my mind and perhaps setting me free; then one bright, icy-clear day in the windy City of Chicago, [I climbed an old wooden staircase...into my future.](#)

I became a modern dancer and I didn’t open another book for the next seven years.



I discovered my body, the 95% of me that existed below my head and over-stuffed brain. I discovered movement, freedom, self expression, instinct, improvisation, and...a part of myself that my 22 years of formal education had completely neglected. I discovered... my “self.” And as I said, I think that’s what happened to “all of us,” to the youth movement of the era, to the kids who rebelled against conformity, materialism, and convention, who became “hippies,” artists, and part of the “alternative culture.” Bob Dylan and the Beatles led the way – into politics, protest, Eastern religion, peace, love, and the erstwhile “sex, drugs, and rock ‘roll.”

But of course, it was hard to hold onto these values, activities, and ideals as we grew up and aged, long after we helped end the Vietnam War and pass civil rights legislation; long after Richard Nixon resigned over the Watergate scandal. Some of us became parents, had to hold down reliable jobs, became “yuppies.” The ideals faded as many of us had to button down ourselves, just like our parents before us, and our children no longer wanted to celebrate and preserve our “hippie” ideals, but instead dismissed them as silly and unrealistic. They wanted instead to become successful business men and women, to become rich and famous, to own start ups, dot coms, and brimming 401(k)s.

But now here's the rub, as I, as we, retire 50 years later. Were they right? Our kids? And *their* kids? Was I, were we, wrong? Were freedom and transcendence superfluous? I mean, for me, "art" was my god, my way to "transcend" myself. To be bigger than myself. To connect with and touch others. To be part of the whole. I rejected the idea that it was only money, wealth, accumulation, and security that mattered. While now I wonder: are those the very prerequisites, and lessons of, old age, contentment, and retirement?

I certainly didn't think so, or care, as I outgrew my black tights and dancing days, became a crazy clown in my 30s, founded and directed NYC's Resident Clown Troupe, the [Cumeezi Bozo Ensemble](#), ran for Mayor of New York City as clown Gino Cumeezi in 1977 and finished 5th out of 4 candidates.



I held onto my artist identity with all my might. I didn't want to let it go, to compromise it. I was an artist, a clown; I spoke truth to power. I would *find* a way to make a living...which I did...while the NEA was still generous with grants to small non-profit arts companies. When there was a will, there was always a way. Even if we clowns had to do corporate parties for the likes of Macy's, Cunard, and George Steinbrenner, the owner of the NY Yankees and the Donald Trump of his day, we did it. Happily. We traveled to Holland, Switzerland, and France...as clowns! We were celebrated, feted, and well-paid. At least...well enough.

Then I simply got tired of being the clown king of New Yawk, of running non-profit arts companies, with too many legs and too many mouths to feed. I took a leap out on my own, trying just two legs, as I assaulted the Hollywood TV and film industry by moving from New Yawk to LA in late 1982.

I failed... miserably.



Partially because I wasn't a very good actor... becoming someone else; I was always better at being *myself*. Furthermore, I just didn't like the life of an unemployed Hollywood wannabe – actor, writer, director, producer. Pitching myself to agents, taking meetings, doing auditions... I just didn't have the thick skin or stomach for it. It seemed like "the work" was always *trying* to "get work". Whereas I was used to "working" as an artist... taking dance classes daily, rehearsing daily, teaching daily, clowning daily. I simply didn't like the beggared life of the aspiring, but mostly unemployed, Hollywood actor... whatever.

Fortunately, I was offered a job to teach that single improv class at USC's School of Theatre in 1986, by newly-appointed Dean Ric Toscan, whose play I had directed with offbeat, enthusiastic, and apparently, improvisational aplomb. And before I knew it, I was out of the Hollywood wannabe business, and into both my long teaching career in academia, and back into my self-motivated, self-producing career as a multi-disciplined artist.

First I directed friends' one person shows, then I did the first one myself in 1988, taking it to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival where it was short-listed for Best Show of the Fringe.



Then in 1989 I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease, cancer of the lymphatic system. I was shocked. Dismayed. Scared. "Why me?" Was I going to die at age 42? But... after 6 months of chemo therapy under the good care of Dr. Daniel Lieber, I was pronounced to be in remission, and soon found myself back on the carousel of life. A little wiser and less angry, I hoped, but by 1990 I had begun a documentary film, "[The Poet and the Con](#)", about my relationship with my criminal uncle, Harvey Rosenberg, trying to figure out why I identified more with my outlaw uncle than I did with the middle class, conservative part of my family. How was an artist like a criminal, both living outside the law, by their own rules? Seven years later, the film premiered at the International Documentary Film Festival in Nyon, Switzerland, and then it ran theatrically for four months at three different Laemmle Theatres in LA, due to the support and enthusiasm of Greg Laemmle, the current namesake of the LA art house movie theater "chain".



Right after my recovery from cancer, I also started producing City-wide arts festivals: the poetry segment for Peter Sellars in the 1990 Los Angeles Festival, then the Santa Monica Festival '91, WORD/LA, an Oral Response to the Rodney King Verdict in 1993, and Solo/LA in 1995 at CBS Radford Studio.

Since then, the new millennium has found me reading my own work regularly at spoken word and poetry events at Beyond Baroque, usually under the aegis of Eve Brandstein's "Poetry in Motion" (the [next one](#) being Saturday June 3rd). I've developed and produced many solo shows of new artists at many of the Hollywood Fringe Festivals that have won Best of the Fringe awards. I've traveled the world on several Fulbright grants, and created blogs of my own: "[Trules Rules](#)" and "[e-travels with e. trules](#)," as well as blogged for the [Huffington Post](#) and the [Cultural Weekly](#). And most recently, I've done a [TEDx Talk](#), and now I seem to spending most of my creative time working on, and promoting, a new travel [podcast](#), also called "[e-travels with e. trules](#)."



For all the years that I've taught at USC (1986 – 2017), both as an adjunct and then as a full time member of the faculty, the job and the institution have supported my life choice of being an artist. I was one of the lucky artist-dinosaurs who got a job at a university, through no effort of my own, teaching something I love, while at the same time, being able to have an income, health care, a retirement account, and maybe best of all... 3 and a half months off every summer, and almost a month off over the winter holidays. I was fortunate enough to work with Gordon Davidson, the godfather of LA theater and founder of the Mark Taper Forum, when I brought him to USC near the end of his life and we co-taught classes for a couple of years together, inspiring and instructing a new generation of hopeful theater artists.

On paper, it sounds like "a wonderful life", right?

In reality though, and in my own experience, it hasn't been easy, not without its many challenges, confrontations, and life-changing choices. No life is... very simple at all.

But now... three days into this story... I'm officially "retired". I have already picked up that final pay check and paid for the first month of my wife's and son's new Kaiser Individual and Family

health plan. It's not cheap. And I don't qualify for the Affordable Health Care Act, desperately fighting for its life in Congress, not to become Trump's "American Health Care Act" of 2017.

Our country is not kind to its poor or middle classes. Or to its aging population. To those without power or wealth. Why no one has to pay Social Security taxes when they earn more than \$118,000 a year... is an unanswerable abomination of a question. Why health care is not a right of all American citizens and residents, like it is in the rest of the civilized world, can only be answered by the humongous greed of our insurance companies and the insatiable appetite of the capitalistic system.

Our country is not set up for a comfortable "Act Three." And what I think is a real oversight, even an educational crime, is that we Americans haven't been educated or prepared for retirement or a third act. I mean, why didn't Ike Eisenhower and his School Board require all us Baby Boomers to take a class in economics? In real estate? In investment? In health care? In retirement? In aging and dying? Because... as we're quickly finding out, and we should have been forewarned, aging isn't for the weak of heart, or... as our great American novelist Philip Roth says, "Old age isn't a battle, it's a massacre."

Shut up, Trules! You still have the rest of your life in front of you. Why don't you see it as an opportunity? As the glass being half full instead of half empty? Who knows what you can create in these next many years, for as many as those may be? Why don't you just keep saying "yes" like you've done for all these years; that's what the improvisational rules of life demand?

Because... there's good part of me (or maybe not so "good") that is scared to death. What an idiom! "Scared to death". What exactly does that mean? We all know death is coming, right? Even though our society and culture try to avoid and escape the reality at all cost. Instead we try to preserve life with medical, technological wizardry as long as scientifically possible... even long after the quality of life is gone. In contrast – to other countries and cultures – who accept death... as part of life. Who push their aged off into the frigid sea – on icebergs – when it's time to let go and die. Who respect and care for their elders. Who worship their ancestors and expect them to come back for an annual visit on the Day of the Dead. Mexico. My wife's Indonesia. Most simpler and more "primitive" cultures. But... who has it right? And who has it wrong?



So yeah... I'm scared... not so much of dying... but more of running out of money. Of losing health care. My Social Security. My Medicare. Of facing the "massacre" unprotected by the society and country I trusted and believed in.

I don't know what more to say about retirement. Other than perhaps... "I used to be a theater Prof at USC for a while. It was one of my many careers in the arts. Sure, it was for a long time, 31 years, and I was a lucky man, but that was Act 2. Now it's time for the leap into Act 3... my last."

Do I still yearn to go into an empty theater, to create theatrical magic out of a simple black box? To tell stories? To see other peoples' shows? To live a "life in the theater"? Honestly, I just... don't know. I'll have to see.

For now... I just want to stay healthy. Play tennis a few times a week. Help raise my 10 year old son. Teach him well. Do simple things. Take care of the garden. Walk the dog. Not plan too much. Enjoy the day. Walk around, re-seeing my city, Los Angeles, anew. Live life... one day at a time.

Since none of us have figured out how to predict the future... or know when our run will be over... then I figure... I might as well try to enjoy the time I have left.



I'm sure the rest of my life will be revealed to me, just as my life, until now, has been revealed... created... one day... one year at a time.

What more can I ask? What more can we know?

Happy retirement, Trules.

Happy retirement, my friends.....

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