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LA Living … The Human Comedy of Not Selling Out

Karen Sunde · Monday, December 12th, 2011

This country is broken into cities that assume they are culturally at war with each other, and I am a sad product of insane, ingrained prejudice.

When I knew my work must be creative for me to be happy, I had to choose a city. Since theatre was my field, I thought "where in America?" London was supreme at theatre, but I wanted to help create what London had here. So: Chicago, Los Angeles, New York…but I went first to San Francisco. I loved it, was able to earn, but though I knew the culture shock could be a killer, it had to be New York.

I realize now that going to San Francisco – which, like in the song, I wept upon leaving – already had set me up to loathe-and-fear LA. The city by the bay tends to preen its self-esteem with the scorn it heaps on its sister-paradise, where, as they say – life is easy, paychecks profligate, taste lower than low. Remember "I'd rather be poor in San Francisco than rich in New York"?

If "going to LA" equaled "selling out" in San Francisco, how much more engrained is anti-LA prejudice among New York theatre types. It's a matter of honor – but carries the sneaking awareness of being a vital lie. These sour grapes are rotten; to labor away on stage is to be relatively impoverished in everything but, if you're lucky, artistic fulfillment. So that when "Hollywood calls," you hope to juggle a quick paycheck with a quick return east, and it takes a brave New Yorker to admit he "loves poolside life," while resisting total seduction.

All this I knew, but this stew also fed my private fear-wall, which metamorphosed into self-defeating farce the moment I began writing screenplays. Only the perceived death of my work via strangulation (lack of production milieu) forced me to finally land at LAX, and to risk, to my mind, losing my beloved NYC.

I feared LA so irrationally, was so certain I'd be miserable, lost, a duck out of water, (plus, an old duck in 20-something heaven), I had to do a drastic mental strong-arm on myself to even attempt the foray. How could I possibly feel comfortable, that I wouldn't perish on contact with this alien wasteland? This called for cleverness: I decided to defy the eternal, alienating "You must have a car in LA," – and that was key.

Granted – the distance of everything from everything proved my most palpable, ever-present. unmitigable problem, still, that's the one true thing. Everything else I feared proved only fear itself, or prejudice.

So I simply imagined myself arriving at any other city determined to meet its life, its people, on its own terms, but my way – ie, via public transportation. And: It. Was. Glorious. I've enough examples why to fill another confession, but, in short, I fell in love with the place. What a shame this took so long, that I had to climb over such heaps of prejudicial crap to arrive at simple human truth. I'd still be appalled, if I weren't so delighted at my soul-nourishing discovery: that I can, also, love LA.

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