My Favorite World #14



The regular visitor to My Favorite World has probably noticed that I love movies. Here we go again.

A couple of weeks ago, the family was having a celebratory dinner and we spontaneously decided to go see a movie. This never happens. We all have so many schedule issues, but this night, we tossed it all aside.

We dashed to the theater with son using his hand-held intertubes google machine to find something worth seeing. The listings were grim. Would I endure the never-going-to-go-away Matthew McConaughey trying to sell me a Lincoln from the depths of space? How about another animated romp with soulful animals sporting overlarge eyes? Perhaps a celebration of someone who hides in trees and shoots people in the back? Things were not looking good.

Then he mentioned one that I had heard of, vaguely, and since it was the only one that fit our timing, we gave it a spin. And wow.

Two Days, One Night turned out to be one of those little films that really stick with you. Made by the Dardenne brothers<fn>Think a Belgian-flavored Coen Brothers partnership</fn>, in French with subtitles, this is the story of Sandra (Marion Cotillard). Recovering from illness and all set to return to her job, Sandra gets word that her co-workers have voted her out so they could each receive a thousand-Euro bonus. Dogs eat dogs.

But she convinces the boss to hold another election to give her the weekend to convince her co-workers to change their vote. That's the setup, and the rest of the movie shows Sandra going from one co-worker to the next, making her case. Occasionally groveling, always a bundle of nerves barely contained by her Xanax, the reactions she elicits run the gamut. From people who felt such shame at their greed to people who wanted her to *understand* just how important that money is for her family and wouldn't she just see it their way, to actual outbursts of violence that she would dare 'stir the shit'.

In lesser hands, this setup could devolve into simplistic characters playing out obvious cliches. In Hollywood, there would have to be gun play or a big speech about shared humanity and triumph of the spirit or some such bushwah. But here, every character has a human dimension.<fn>Even the dickhead supervisor and boss who thought it was a swell idea to pit these people against one another in the first place. Fucking motherfuckers.</fn> You see that everyone is struggling; that even good people who know right from wrong can succumb to the pressures of not having enough money to make ends meet; that the conflict within the working class – conflict often deliberately instigated by the Galtian superheroes – creates degrees of rightness/wrongness that makes moral judgement nearly impossible, because you know how much it costs to send your kids to school/take care of medical expenses/&c.<fn>Again, with the exception of the dickhead bosses. Fk those guys. I recognized them as though I had known them personally.</fn>

And in Hollywood, you can bet there would be at least *some* makeup. Cotillard, one of Europe's most financially and artistically successful actors, is a beauty, a fashion model, and spokesperson for a variety of glamour products. But here, she is washed out, an aging woman of former beauty who has endured too much to trouble with her appearance.



Too tired to care

A mother of two, married to an underemployed man who also happens to be filled with love and devotion, Sandra is at the end of her rope. She looks tired and beaten. The question at the core – will she persuade enough people to give up their bonus to save her job – seems at once impossible to achieve while we believe “of course she can, it’s the movies!”.

And Cotillard is just stunningly perfect in the role. (She was nominated for the Best Actress Oscar for the role.) Of course we’re rooting for her, and of course we see there is no way in hell she can possibly succeed. We know that she is fragile, and in many ways barely even alive to her world anymore. And yet…

So, no spoilers. This movie held us in the palm of its hand for 95 minutes. Along the way, we meet some truly good people, some people who wish they were good but aren’t quite, and a couple of people you wish would slip and fall down some steep stairs. It’s kind of like life that way.

Two Days, One Night. Just the kind of unexpected surprise that makes this My Favorite World. Go. Watch. Thank me later.

My Favorite World #13

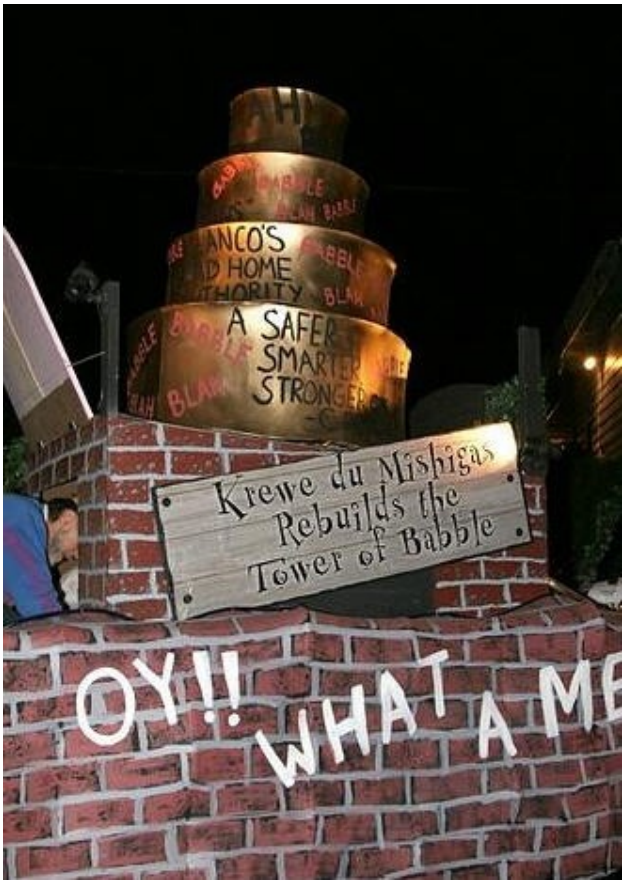


Mardi Gras from the Inside

My Favorite World always has a bit of New Orleans in the mix, even when it doesn't, which isn't often, and even then, it does. So for Ash Wednesday, this raw journal entry recounting the time Your Narrator marched as a member of Krewe du Mishigas in the Krewe du Vieux parade.

We pick up the journey as the Narrator and She Who Makes Me Better arrive at the staging warehouse in the Marigny on the afternoon of the parade, Feb 3, 2007.

… and stayed there until 4:30 when our host drove us to the Den of Muses in Architect Alley. This is a huge, old warehouse in the Marigny district where all the Krewe du Vieux floats are built. Here's a shot of our float.



Krewe du Mishigas – Re-Jewvenating New Orleans

This place is a Fellini set on mushrooms. Huge bits of floats from years past hang from the ceilings – oversized papier mache busts of Peewee Herman, Bush, Nixon, local politicos, not to mention the anatomically (extremely) incorrect sculptures of semi-private body bits. A very colorful and lively setting. In the middle of this, a brass band led by the esteemed Trombone Shorty. These guys can get a crowd cooking.







And this crowd was well cooked

All around us, hundreds of creatively festooned paraders, with lots of food and drink, and the aroma of cigars (cheap *and* Cubano), patchouli, and high-grade pot wafting on the breeze.

There are vendors hawking shrimp and oyster po’boys, bowls of jambalaya and gumbo,<fn>A po’boy is a traditional sandwich on a loaf of French bread with lettuce, tomato, ketchup, pickles and mustard, with some kind of meat that is usually deep-fried. It is truly heaven on a stick. Jambalaya and gumbo are traditional Cajun dishes, the first a rice based casserole and the other a stew, usually filled with seafood and other delights. When done well, there is no better food anywhere. Period. All of these foods were originally poor peoples’ food, true folk dishes. Now you can pay bookoo bucks at linen napkin restaurants to eat like a pauper.</fn> huge bags of strung beads to toss to parade watchers, pocket-sized bottles of

liquor, and several essentials that fall outside the legal economy. Heavy local TV coverage.

It is fucking cold, and I am under about five layers of clothes. We wander around a bunch to stay warm, checking all the other floats and krewe costumes because once the parade begins all you really see is your Krewe<fn>And the ass of your asses.</fn> and the passing parade route. Sort of an inverted viewing of a parade, if that makes any sense. At one point, someone stops She Who to verify that it is really her – one of her students! So come Monday, J will either be known as the coolest prof in her domain or will be typecast as a representative of the pointy-headed liberal elite, some sort of demented, libertine queen of debauche leading our youth down the primrose path of Soddom and freethinking secularism. Maybe both. The pink wig was certainly an eye-popper. Here we are *en regalia*.



The prettiest accident victim you ever saw



A pair of Jewish carpenters

Finally, at 6:30, we move to the beginning of the parade route, where we stand and wait and apply some more special cough syrup while the handlers lead in the mules<fn> KdV is the only parade that still uses mules for float propulsion. This is both a feature and a challenge. Mules are testy beasts, and we were repeatedly warned that i) they kick, and ii) they bite. They are also highly flatulent and have efficient intestinal function that produce copious steaming piles. Figure a dozen mules in the parade, and our team next to last in line, and you can well imagine that we did a lot of fancy stepping to avoid the mule memories. Mules also have a tendency to stop and back up without reason or warning. On the other hand, there were no nasty diesel fumes, and the humble mule is certainly more true to the tradition of Mardi Gras.</fn> and hitch them to the floats. Then more waiting, and it is getting verry fucking colder.<fn>At this point, mid-30s. By end of the parade, 27*.</fn> Another nip of

special cough syrup to stave off the cold.

By this time, all the brass bands are in place. Several of the best bands are here – Treme, the Original Hurricane Brass Band, Trombone Shorty's gang, this bunch.



Paulin Brothers Brass Band

Our krewe hired NOLA's only marching klezmer band, the Panorama Jazz Band. I did not know about this ahead of time, and when they started a traditional second-line drum beat, I expected the traditional good stuff. Instead, trumpets, saxes, alto horns, tubas, and clarinets began wailing an improvisation in a harmonic minor mode, Eastern European in maximus, and then hit the most jaw-dropping ensemble passage I've ever heard on the streets of New Orleans. This team was ace, and even had several women players,<fn>Especially the incendiary Aurora Nealand. Look her up.</fn> which is pretty rare in the brass band world.<fn>Panorama has since become one of my NOLA faves. And the presence of wymmins in the second line is not quite the rare sight it was then.</fn>

Finally, we begin marching at 7:15. I'm not certain exactly where we are,<fn>SOP for carnival season.</fn> but I eventually suss that we began in the Bywater area and thread through Marigny. Crossing Esplanade, I recognize our route as we forge ahead through the French Quarter to end at the

Central Business District and the State Palace Theatre where the ball is underway. But that's getting the float ahead of the mule.

The crowds in Bywater and Marigny are mostly residents. Lots of people on their front porches and balconies, and very cool crowds in the streets clamoring for beads and trinkets, which we tossed with abandon. Occasionally I would notice a stunning old building like this one.



Hail Krewe!

Peering through one window, I spot a wall of oversized stuffed heads of cartoon characters watching us sashay. No idea what the place was about, but it is somehow an appropriate audience to view our passage.

One of our krewe's trademarks is handing out painted and decorated bagels, so in-the-know revelers know to shout out for these. We also toss beads and bubble gum, fake nose toys, party cups, wooden nickels, and tiny dreidels. Judy received an airline-sized bottle of bourbon in return for a special bagel. More cough syrup.

Once in the French Quarter<fn> Krewe du Vieux is the only parade that still traverses the French Quarter. The narrow streets of the Quarter cannot handle the kinds of crowds that

show up for the later parades. </fn>, the mood got very boisterous and the crowds were much bigger. Scores of people hanging from the balconies, the crowd was 10-15 deep in spots. Lots of kisses exchanged for beads and bagels, the occasional naked breast proffered<fn>Hey, Mister!</fn> and heavy excitement over the Tower of Babble's offerings of Double-Bubble Babble Gum. Basically, a great exchange of goodwilled energy. I am typically nervous in big crowds, being that a crowd is never more than a turn or two away from becoming a mob. But not tonight. The crowd is generally generous, festive, and filled with joy. Several times, She Who got the crowd going with a chant of "Oy!" For my usually-reticent wife, this is quite something.

Lots of good humor mixed with lingering resentment at the poor performance of local and national government post-Katrina. This pervades all of life in NOLA these days, and it is only natural that the parade theme (Habitat for Insanity – Rebuilding the Tower of Babble) would reflect this.

This parade in particular reflects the "real" New Orleans, and the locals know this is one of the parades that is a must-see during the season. For one thing, the krewes in this parade builds all the floats without professional help.<fn>Some of the 'bigger' krewes spend up to $40,000 to have their floats built by a local specialty business. These are enormous constructions that can carry several dozen people. Member fees for these krewes can run into the five-figure range. By comparison, it cost us less than $350 for the whole season, and that included the babysitter to keep our kids while we marched.</fn> And because it comes so far ahead of Fat Tuesday (the peak of the tourista invasion), it is pretty close to a locals-only event. This helps tamp down the wretched excess that accompanies the later parades…this night was simply about excess.

But it was also about joy, and shared community, and resilience and tragedy. Because the roots of Mardi Gras stem

from the deep Catholic culture here, originally a big 3-week celebration of the prevailing *carpe diem* of NOLA before the more sober re-assessment and reflection that accompanies the Lenten season. And because reflection here inevitably leads to contemplation of the loss and horror of Katrina – with all the attendant challenges of dealing with the breakdown of systems like garbage collection and public safety, not to mention the greed-soaked and sloth-like responses of government at all levels.



Vast parts of New Orleans still look like this – this is the house where my grandmother lived when I was a wee sprite

So for these few weeks (and especially at these earlier parades and the other krewes that are less geared for the tourist industry), this is a community that comes together for a rolling thunder of celebration of what remains the most distinctive civic culture in the United States; and a living memorial for all that was lost; and finally, at essence, a mass prayer for what is possible and what could be.

After the parade, we visited the Krewe Ball at the State

Theatre on Canal for about ten minutes. Too crowded, too grungy, too loud. Fittingly for this post-Katrina realm, the bathrooms flooded and there were 4-5 inches of standing water everywhere except the balcony. Not even Ziggy Modeliste and George Porter on the stage could keep us there. We were sensorially overloaded, and had been on our feet for 7 hours, small bits frozen, so we left and found some food and a drink. Alas, the world's very worst blues band began playing (they were ugly, sounded like shit, and were very loud), and we bailed quickly and returned to Chez V to tumble abed at 1 a.m.

This morning, coffee and breakfast and enjoying some quiet time with our friends. And for the past little while, typing this report, hoping to convey some of the essence of a really marvelous and rare experience. I'm not a New Orleans insider, but I have been privileged to see this magnificent celebration from the inside.

My Favorite World.

My Favorite World #12



There Is No Joy in Mudville

So by now, everybody has heard that Stewart is leaving the Daily Show. The Daily Show has been a huge factor in My Favorite World for years.

I am inconsolable.

But he was ‘just’ a comedian, a joker who made up stories to make people look foolish.

That this happens in the same week when an overpaid Wigstand was sacked from his Respectable Anchorman Desk for making up stories to make himself seem cool…well, the bullshit piles up so fast you need wings to stay above it all.

Even more better: I read the news of his departure as I watched him deliver a right rogering to the self aggrandizing Wigstand from last night’s ep, a man who happens to have been his college roommate and one of his oldest friends – neither of which fact saved the Wigstand from a savage kick in the junk, satire-wise – all of which serves to unleash a cascade of multivalence that reminds me of my absolute favoriteness of this world of ours that is so bitterly saddening me right now.

And I really thought I would cry.<fn>Jury’s out. It could still happen.</fn>

Stewart is one of the most effective critical operators facing the machine of our modern corporate media, perhaps the single most salient and effective critic we’ve seen of that frothy mix of ego and insiderism and fecal matter and rank commerce we’ve gorged upon as a staple of our diet of manufactured consent for the past 30, 50, 75, 150, however many years. Period. Say what you will about McLuhan and Chomsky (and others): no matter how sharp their insights, Stewart managed to tap the lode vein of bullshit running through our public discourse and present it in way that the powerful – and their

media enablers – could not afford to ignore. For all the intellectual power of McLuhan or Chomsky, they were easy to ignore. Not Stewart. He pulled peoples' pants down and spanked them, in public, and dared them to ignore it.

They couldn't.

Even the Foxbots – who tried their damndest to ignore the power of The Daily Show<fn>And the parade of spinoffs and imitators who followed in its wake.</fn> could not escape the impact of Daily Show's critical stance. It's pretty simple…Jon Stewart and his writers fundamentally altered the way major media reports the news now. Even – especially – when they pretend it hasn't.

Time moves. Colbert is the new Letterman. Stewart has been at this gig for fifteen years. It's a long time for any gig, but you have to imagine that the pressure that the DS crew put on themselves – and the pressure of knowing that so many were waiting to pounce on any actionable misstep<fn>see, e.g., Dan Rather or Brian Wigstand</fn> – well that has got to wear a body down. Who can blame the guy for wanting something different?

I can't blame, but I can mourn. We need someone like this to keep the heat on those vapid performers with serious mein, the Wolf Beard of CNN, the shoutyfacers of MSNBC<fn>The Good Doc Maddow excepted, may she stay forever.</fn>, the horse's asses of the Faux fools. John Oliver is doing good work. Colbert will be around, though I fear he will be more of an everyman host than has been his legacy. (You won't see him savaging the White House Correspondents from his new gig, I'll wager.)

And that leaves me bereft, thinking about a cable landscape that will be missing the sanest voice it has had for the past fifteen years. The ancient tradition of the jester, the fool, the one voice with the license to say what really needs to be said, to declare the Emperor naked, to afflict the pompous,

&c. – there looms a gaping maw that Stewart filled for years. Shtfkgdmn.

It’s still My Favorite World, and I’m raising a glass to the great fifteen years of work Stewart has delivered. We are a better society than we would have been without him. Salute, Stewart. Salute.

But joy? Not in Mudville. Not tonight.

My Favorite World #11



One of the most memorable movies of my lifetime is the 1990 version of *Cyrano de Bergerac,* starring Gerard Depardieu. It’s a grand epic, lushly staged and photographed. And Depardieu was, at the time, at the absolute top of his game.<fn>He’s become something of a joke in recent years, but in this period, he was *incroyable*. With *Cyrano,* he’s one of a handful to earn an Oscar nomination for a non-English speaking role.</fn>

Many buckles were swashed in the making of this film, feats of derring do beyond mortal imagination, swords flashing, death all around. And it is an unbelievably effective romance – in that sense of man-woman-crossed-stars-longing – that is not my usual cup of oolong, but when it works, one must submit or accept the ugly truth that one is made of stone.

The English subtitling was turned over to Anthony Burgess<fn>Author of *Clockwork Orange*, among many other great books.</fn>, who re-created a gorgeous rhyming couplet translation that was designed to mirror the language and rhythms of Edmond Rostand's original text. My French skills are too poor to pass any judgement on the fidelity, but the language itself is pure music.

Most people know the story…dazzling poet/war hero with a gargantuan schnozzola loves Roxanne, but feels himself too ugly to approach her as a suitor; they are, instead, great friends. Along comes the handsome, dullard Christian <fn>No really, that's his name; it's pretty clear throughout that Rostand is something of an anti-cleric</fn>; he loves Roxanne, but only insofar as an empty imbecile can. Cyrano – who knows her soul – provides the poetry that makes Roxanne 'love' Christian, but Christian dies in battle and she goes to live in a convent forevermore, clutching his blood-stained farewell letter to her snowy white and ample breast.<fn>You can look it up.</fn>

Cyrano is also something of a rabble-rouser, an anti-cleric and anti-royalist troublemaker – a champion of science over superstition – who makes enemies as easily as he makes water after a night of heavy drinking. In the end, his enemies toss a huge beam off a building onto his head, delivering a not-quite-immediate mortal wound. All the better to allow him the best dying words in the history of forever.

Here's the ending. He is visiting Roxanne at the convent, as he has done weekly since she went there to live fourteen years past. She does not know he is dying at first, and there is an amazing segment where she asks him to read Christian's blood-stained farewell letter for the first time, not realizing that Cyrano had written it himself those years ago. But he "reads" it, word for word, from memory, in a fading twilight that could not possibly illumine a written word. In a flash, she understands that it was in fact Cyrano who wrote the words

that had captured her soul, that it was Cyrano who she loved. And at that moment, death rears its head:<fn>Keep reading, it’s worth it, I promise.</fn>

CYRANO:

I believe he’s staring…

that he dares to stare at my nose, that Ruffian!

(*He raises his sword*.)

What do you say? It’s useless?…I know, ah yes!

But one cannot fight hoping only for success!

No! No: it’s still more sweet if it’s all in vain!

– Who are all you, there! – Thousands, you claim?

Ah, I know you all, you old enemies of mine!

Deceit!

(*He strikes in air with his sword*.)

There! There! Ha! And Compromise!

Prejudice, Cowardice! …

(*He strikes*.)

That I make a treaty?

Never, never! – Ah! Are you there, Stupidity?

– I know that you’ll lay me low in the end

No matter! I fight on! I fight! I fight again!

(*He makes passes in the air, and stops, breathless*.)

Yes you take all from me: the laurel and the rose!

Take them! Despite you there’s something though

I keep, that tonight, as I go to meet my Deity,

there will I brush the blue threshold beneath my feet,

something I bear, in spite of you all, that’s

free of hurt, or stain,

(*He springs forward, his sword raised;*

and that’s…

(The sword falls from his hand; he staggers, and falls back into the arms of Le Bret and Ragueneau.)

ROXANE (*bending and kissing his forehead*):

that’s? …

CYRANO (*opening his eyes, recognizing her, and smiling as he speaks)*:

My panache.

Curtain.

Well shit. That’s a good way to die.

Note that *panache* translates several different ways – a feather, the plume in his hat, display, swagger, attack, or simply, spirit – that fit the scene perfectly. But the part of this that stuck with me over the years – the reason this makes My Favorite World what it is – is this:

Motherfucker knows the most important thing is not what happens, not whether you win or lose – the most important thing is that you take it in stride and do it with style.

> *What do you say? It’s useless?…I know, ah yes!*
> *But one cannot fight hoping only for success!*

No! No: it's still more sweet if it's all in vain!

Come on, now….is there any better description of what it means to be an engaged human in a random and cruel universe? Yes, we do it, if only because the doing it is in itself the point.

Ah! Are you there, Stupidity?
I know that you'll lay me low in the end
No matter! I fight on! I fight! I fight again!

Cyrano knows what the outcome will be. Yet he remains one of the great heroes in our mythic world. Not because of his exploits in battle or with a sword. That's commonplace shit. Cyrano is a hero because he refuses to relent when faced with a world of pimps and imbeciles and manipulators, even though he realizes that the resistance is likely futile. It's the willingness to stand against the madness that marks the hero.<fn>I mean for fuck sake and come on…we're arguing about vaccines again.</fn>

Keep coming at me, bitches.

Yes you take all from me: the laurel and the rose!

Yet there is something still that will always be mine, and when I go to God's presence, there will I brush the blue threshold beneath my feet, something I bear, in spite of you all, that's free of hurt, or stain,

and that's

My Panache.

Mark his words. Against all odds, you will not take my panache.

My. Favorite. World.