My Favorite World #13

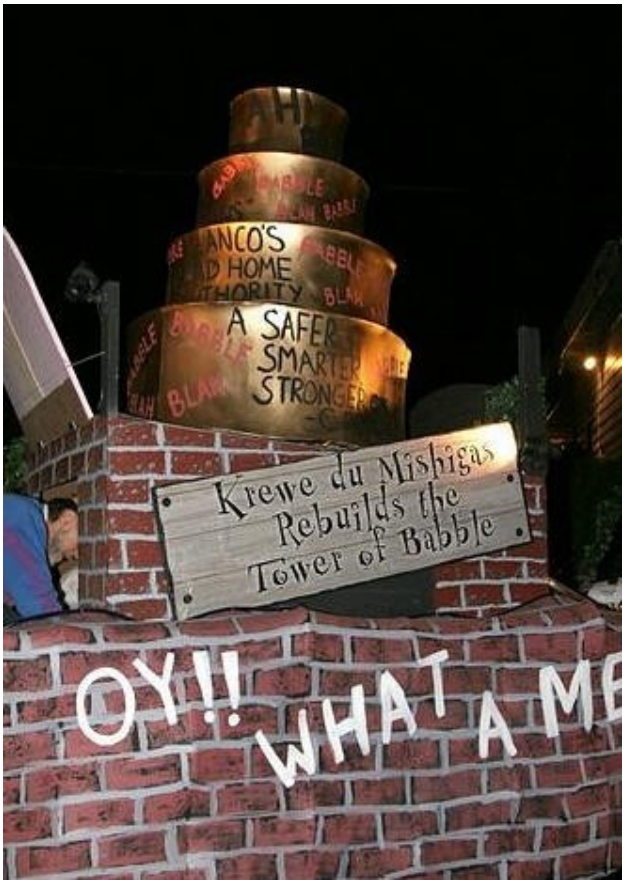


Mardi Gras from the Inside

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.

It's Always Something. Usually.



Last week left us with a thought experiment, predicated on the proposition that, given two pieces of looming news, only one

can possibly turn out well.<fn>For me, that qualified as a burst of optimism.</fn>

Well imagine my surprise. The verdict on The Cancer is negative; the verdict on Daughter's acceptance to first-pick U is positive. We have defied the odds. I will live long enough to be bankrupted by my childrens' higher education expenses. And my allegedly data-based pessimism has taken yet another blow, maybe even enough to convert me into one of the smiling optimists of the world.

Ah, pshaw. Go on.

In the aftermath of all the shoes dropping, each in their preferred place, this weekend was an orgy of indolence and self-indulgence. Yeah, ok, I completed taxes and did some real work<fn>My Calvinist streak never far from the surface.</fn>, but we blew off and went to the movies and down to the shore and out to dinner and drank beer in the afternoon and took naps and let the dog hang her head out the car window.

I also stalked an egret for a short conversation, getting within about five feet of this fella.



He didn’t have much to say, but he made his words count.

This was part of a jaunt to St Marks Wildlife Refuge, a piece of paradise on this planet. Proof….



That post-bridge, thanks Clarence, George Bailey feeling is getting all up amongst me. Why, I’m downright ungrumpy.

Also, too…I may actually be able to play a guitar for the first time in about 5 months. Not quite, but the wrist seems to be trying to get better. And the guitar anxiety dreams<fn>Picture naked for a final exam, but more fraught.</fn> are kicking in with a vengeance. Dare I express optimism on this score? Dare I not?

Your regularly scheduled dyspepticism will resume next week. Or not. No promises. Maybe I’ll be Captain Fucking Cheerful from now on.

Bwahahahahahahahahaha.

Material. Timing. Delivery. And the beauty of random disregard.



Life is busy and such, mostly in ways good. But one must never disregard the wisdom of Miss ~~Latella~~ Rosannadana.

(Ed Note: Eagle-eyed reader Popopopopovich correctly points out that it was in fact Rosanna Rosanadanna who made famous the "It's always something" catchphrase. The management apologizes for any inconvenience and begs forbearance of the litigious demons of the Gilda Radner Estate.<fn>Worse than Disney, I hear.</fn> The Writer has been put on a strict diet of gruel made from the ground up bones of our recently departed fact-checker. We regret the error.)

It's always something.

In the past two weeks…two biopsies to try and figure out why my aching Studebaker of a body continues to drop parts despite the mechanics' best efforts. The first: mostly negative (yay!) but inconclusive as to another one of those melodramatic 'C' word diagnoses. Results of the latest test due Friday. I expect good news, as most of my symptoms have disappeared untreated. Go figger.<fn>And I still cannot grip a guitar, and fk that shit, Rupert.</fn>

In the meantime, Awesome Daughter is expecting news about whether her first choice college welcomes her with open arms. Decision day is Friday. Well.

Yesterday, as she was asking for a favor, she demurred at pushing too hard, because (her words) “you’re dealing with that whole cancer thing.” I laughed so hard I thought I’d plotz. And of course, she won her request. Comedy is all about material, timing, and delivery. A-plus on all fronts.

This evening, we were all laughing about her remark.<fn>Graveyard whistling and disregard for solemnity being big around these parts.</fn> Son declared her horrible. I declared him my favorite, as one is always well-advised to encourage sycophancy from the underlings.

Then it struck me: a thought experiment!<fn>I’ve been reading the latest Daniel Dennett. My puzzlers are not nearly as profound, but I aver to the inspiration.</fn>

> A family awaits two pieces of news of critical importance. Only one response can be positive. Do you, daughter, wish me to be cancer-free, or do you wish to be accepted to your dream school?

Zero hesitation from my (truly) loving and wonderful child:

> College acceptance. Cancer is treatable.

A moment of WTF was that pause, and then we all fell down laughing.

Material was a tad off center, but the timing and delivery was pure Coltrane. Brava.

Also, too, in the realm of casual disregard….

The bloggy vineyard of i2b attracts a steady parade of eyeballs, but few of the humans bother to leave comments. This makes me very sad.<fn>Try to hear that phrase in the icy teutonic accent of Heidi Klum dismissing a Project Runway contestant for bad taste.</fn>

So, dear reader, your random disregard leads me to bask in the

warming glow of nothing but spambot generated comments intended to entice me to purchase sports jerseys, weight loss supplements, and penis enhancers.<fn>Aside from the jerseys, none of that stuff is for real. Believe me.</fn> But I've come to love some of these simplistic machine friends, as their comments serve to encourage continued blogularity.<fn>And to stimulate my tumescence for under the medically recommended four-hour maximum.</fn> To wit:

> *What i don't understood is in reality how you are not actually a lot more neatly-appreciated than you may be right now. You are so intelligent. You know therefore significantly in terms of this subject, made me in my view consider it from a lot of various angles. Its like men and women are not fascinated except it is something to accomplish with Girl gaga! Your individual stuffs excellent. At all times care for it up!*

Damn right, registered user Tanya3756dc from Uzbekistan. And thanks for the shout out.

There are two kinds of these auto-messages. One is dry, written in impeccably poor language, and offering nothing but commercial enticement. But such feeble witterings are not sufficient for my dear Tanya3765dc. These comments find art in the strangest places.

> *You know therefore significantly in terms of this subject, made me in my view consider it from a lot of various angles. Its like men and women are not fascinated except it is something to accomplish with Girl gaga!*

A shrewd judge of literary merit is my Tanya3765. Indeed, does not Girl Gaga make the world go 'round? Mais bien sur! Even Cole Porter knew that!

> *Your individual stuffs excellent. At all times care for it*

> *up!*

You bet your sweet Uzbekian bippy, Tanya. My individual stuffs excellent, as legions far and wide will attest.

But more critically, my beloved Tanya3765, despite her automated disposition and limited linguistic facility, has arrived at the existential core of Immune to Boredom:

> *At all times care for it up.*

Amen, Sister Tanya3765. Amen.

And one last thing….

I watched *Casablanca* for around the 75th time last night. I was really just going to watch for a minute, but one thing led to Sam and Ilsa and *Les Marseilles* and "Shocked, shocked I say!" and I was done for. And while I always choke up at the big moments and miss subtleties because goddammit the problems of two people don't amount to a hill of beans in this world and we'll always have Paris, and therefore I'm a helpless heap incapable of critical scrutiny…what I realized in watching this time was: there is not one wasted word, frame, musical note in this movie. Every cut, every aside, every casual glance at the side of the scene contributes to a deeper story.

Try to think of more than a few works of art that achieve this superb economy.

You think the great works of Dickens or Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy might not have benefited from a little judicious pruning? How about *Lawrence of Arabia*, or even Billy the Bard's plays? Oh, how they do go on!

Even my favorite book of ever, the infinite *Infinite Jest*…even that epic could probably have lost a word or 5000 and suffered nothing from the loss.<fn>Though I would not be the one to cut

even a punctuation mark from that one.</fn>

I bring this point to bear for two reasons.

One, *Casablanca* may just be a perfect piece of art. Consider it. The story is timeless. The material is poetry. The delivery and timing, utterly majestic.

Two: however perfect the movie may be as an example of aesthetic precision and efficiency, this blog post stakes out the opposite pole as an exemplar of free-floating random and discursive disregard.

Mea culpa. This shit don’t write itself.

Here’s looking at you, kid.



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.