

## ***ALL THE WORLD***

**By Michael Ventura**

**June 13, 2003**

Last night in a Mexican bar Karen told of teaching our 12th grade *Brave New World* and *1984*, how Julian said something that made her socks go up and down: "Even a person in a coma has a purpose ... because that person is being cared for by nurses, doctors, family, and friends, and the purpose of all *their* lives is influenced and enhanced by caring for the person in the coma."

I scribbled the quote on a napkin while telling Karen, "I've *got* to put that in the play!"

Our seniors have no classes their last month of high school; instead, they put on a play. For four weeks they rehearse night and day; the evening before they graduate, they perform. It's the ultimate one-night stand, more like a circus pitching its tent in a small town (as circuses once did) than what we usually mean when we say "theatre." But circus is at the core of theatre. It's the ethic of the tightrope walker: *Do it right or break your neck*. It's the prescription of the clown (which is also that of the tragedian): *Laugh till you cry, cry till you laugh*. It's the scarred old lion tamer who now shovels elephant shit; asked why doesn't he retire, he smiles gamely: *What, and quit show biz?* It's those ringmasters Falstaff and Hamlet, each in love with the sound of his own voice -- but they know what a voice is for. Our seniors have one shot, one night, to leave one last impression, one last gift and challenge. It's as pure and urgent a form of theatre as I've come across. The kids are saying, in essence: *This is us -- deal with it, if you can catch up to it*.

This year I'm sort of directing the senior show -- "sort of" because in fact we all direct. Everyone has contributed bits and notions to our pastiche of Ibsen, Shakespeare, *Antigone*, Roy Orbison, doo-wop tunes, Charlie Chaplin, Chopin, Tennessee Williams, scenes from *The Birdcage* and *Swingers* and a 1962 episode of *Route 66*, poetry the kids have written, songs they like to sing, Lara's violin, Charlene's pixie dancing, a Bogosian monologue ... an existential stew. We begin most rehearsals singing "Bye Bye Blackbird," one part lament to two parts celebration, because every time that strange and incomprehensible tune catches them unaware for the rest of their lives I want them to remember these weeks ... remember the rings they wore on their toes and John Densmore coaching their percussion and Shakespeare's indefinable word "gleek" (Bottom: "*I can gleek upon occasion*") ... and Julian's perception about people in comas.

Pack up all your cares and woe,  
Here I go, singin' low ...

All day and into the night we play the play. So for the first time in many years I don't spend two hours a day perusing newspapers and magazines. Which means that for these four weeks I've heard history as most do: a cacophony of rumors ... congressional millionaires voting themselves a bonus of hundreds of thousands of dollars and calling it a "tax cut," while children right here go hungry ... that Marine general with the guts to declare the CIA lied about Iraq's weapons ... rumors answered by Morgan's savvy eyes and Nick's Spencer Tracy-ish way of bringing us all down to earth ... all these kids about to be shot out of a cannon into the windswept darkness of the 21st century ... and I wonder if I've given them anything useful for survival in the storm that's coming, the

storm that's hovering even now between the lightning and the thunder. More than anything else on this earth, I want these beauties, all of them, to survive ... with their souls intact ... and to cherish liberty (their own and others') and to stand and fight for liberty. I know the price they'll pay for that. All I can ask of God is that I'm allowed to pay a part of their price for them. And I don't know a good teacher who doesn't feel the same.

What can't be taken from you, unless you surrender it, is the look in your eyes. That look is all you have to meet the world with, in the end.

That's what I tell them. In one way or another. Every chance I get.

Erin's Lady Macbeth enters stage left holding a bright, shiny knife, and Ashley's Charlie Chaplin cavorts around her, tips a bowler, brandishes a cane, and skids offstage while the Lady rhapsodizes, like any terrorist worth the name, about killing children.

*I have given suck, and know*

*How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.*

*I would, while it was smiling in my face,*

*Have plucked my nipple from its boneless gums*

*And dashed the brains out ...*

Bush playing golf in Florida while his daughter lay under the knife in a hospital in Texas. What father wouldn't be sweating in the waiting room praying the doctors knew their business? The father who wouldn't is your president. Lady Macbeth, I got a hot blind date for you.

Charlie Chaplin knows that Lady Macbeth kills babies because it makes her feel more powerful. The way the Bush junta kills. But ... the junta's a rumor tonight, hidden in stacks of unread print in my living room. Charlie Chaplin can't be touched by *that* history. She (in our case) is always gonna cavort, history be damned (history may be another word for "damned"). On our stage Sam's Bottom sings his ditties as hip-hop. What, you didn't know Shakespeare invented the hip-hop beat? Then you got some serious studying to do.

An aside, sort of: My building suffered a rat infestation. One morning three rats, one as big as a cat, stared at me squeaking from the kitchen floor. The exterminator thought I was telling stories, but I'm from the Bronx, I know my rats, and there were these three rats on my kitchen floor squeaking at me as I sat in my living room midst stacks of papers blaring Bush junta news. You can't fault the exterminator's incredulity. I never saw or heard of rats behaving that way, just ... very still, except for their muzzles, staring at me, squeaking. I would like to be able to say that I calmly squeaked back, but I yelled, "JESUS CHRIST!" and instantly they were gone, with only their droppings left for proof that I wasn't hallucinating. Maybe they were putting on a play? Maybe they thought I was?

After that, for several weeks, I saw a dozen-ish more rats -- in daylight, which is also unratlike. *Rats are doing new things*. Heard almost continuous squeaking in the walls. Finally the poison and traps worked. A horrid stench seeped from the walls for a few days, I burned incense like crazy, and then the episode was ... history. And I used a

Yellow Pages-sized volume of *The Collected Shakespeare* to block their main hole of entry -- they tried to push it, every morning it was just slightly askew of where I'd left it, but Shakespeare was too heavy for them. Given his penchant for the gruesome, I thought the Bard would approve this use of his heaviness.

Lock a man in a room with a hundred hungry rats, and the man will be eaten. But when all is said and done, the man was a man -- and the rats are still rats. So much for the unread newsprint on my living-room floor. So much for how this ratty White House wants to eat the world.

Meanwhile, Julian knows the purpose of a woman in a coma. That don't make rat-infested headlines in *The New York Times*: All the news that's fit to make you sick. Julian's news, that "even a woman in a coma has a purpose," is a crumb that can help us survive. In the fairy tales (I taught the seniors fairy tales this spring) even crumbs can point the way home. And if the birds eat 'em, then follow the birds. Either way you may outwit the witch.

How many worlds fall apart on any given day? How many cannot escape the rat-witch? *That's* history.

Like birds we will sing to each other, like notes we will cling to one another  
And beg for the mercy of harmony.

Evann's poem, located toward the end of our play. She recites it while others dance. *That* is our show. (Shakespeare says: *Go*, girl.)

So these seniors and I concoct a pastiche while the storm called "history" builds, thunder overhead. We are about to be swept into the fog and filthy air of *Macbeth's* witches. But anything can happen, and as these fine people graduate I'll repeat a line from J. Michael Straczynsky's *Babylon 5*: "Perhaps you'll find something extraordinary. Perhaps something extraordinary will find you."

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