

‘SUPPOSE I SAID I WAS THE QUEEN OF SPAIN?’

By Michael Ventura

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The years were 1960-64. America's factories hummed in prosperous cities like Saint Louis and Detroit. Jobs lasted a lifetime. Marriage was strictly between a woman and a man. Abortion and homosexuality were outlawed. Most women were housewives; two-parent families raised most kids. College wasn't expensive. The national debt was pocket change. The government functioned fairly well. Sociologists worried that teens were too conformist. On TV, *Route 66* characters Tod Stiles (Martin Milner) and Buz Murdock (George Maharis) roamed the country and found jobs anywhere they went. That was real; the jobs were there. And yet, and yet...

Watch the new box set of *Route 66*'s 116 episodes and you may wonder why millions of viewers in America's Camelot years responded to dialogue like this, from the episode "Three Sides," written in 1960 by series co-creator Stirling Silliphant: "It's the times that's bugging you, Tod." "Naw, that's no excuse, Buz. It's always the times."

Something boiled beneath the proud certainties of those times – something unnamed, uncertain, and restless. Why else would there be a significant audience for lines like these?

"The Strengthening Angels" (1960, written by Silliphant): "Most people are victims of their own low standards, no matter where you look."

"Peace, Pity, Pardon" (spring, 1963, written by Silliphant): "In a world of jails, who is not in jail? Even the jailers." He quotes a poem by Antonio Machado: "It's a good thing we know that glasses are for drinking, but it's a bad thing that we don't know what thirst is for."

Many bemoan the loss of that shiny America, forgetting that it was also a time of disturbing thirsts, when few knew what they thirsted for or why.

"Layout at Glen Canyon" (1960, written by Silliphant): "We live in a vacuum, and only some of us know it. We're surrounded by silence." And: "Things never get solved, do they? Discussed, but never solved."

Silliphant sensed a shift deep down in the tectonic plates of American culture. He knew earthquakes were on the way. Things seemed hunky dory except for the reflections in our mirrors, where what we saw and how we interpreted what we saw – our sense of intimate identity -- was changing. When that changes, everything changes.

"Aren't You Surprised to See Me?" (1962, written by Silliphant): "What makes you think that human nature is one way and no other way, rules carved into stone, easy to follow? I'll tell you about the rules: They're written on the wind."

In Silliphant's "How Much a Pound Is Albatross?" (1962), Julie Newmar plays a leather-clad gal roaming the country solo on a motorcycle. She carries no identification. A cop asks her why. She says, "What am I? A gallery of people, but which one? ...Don't you see, papers are so static, all they do is identify at the moment of their issue, but an hour later you're not you, not the you you were an hour before, so the papers are obsolete, invalid. Why pin yourself in place?"

To a judge she says, “It’s not easy to be a pilgrim or a rebel, but how else can you give yourself to life? I’m not looking for myself, your honor, because what I want can’t be found by looking. Only by living.”

This was no avant-garde play; this was TV in prime time. With Newmar’s voice, Silliphant asks a nation supposedly fixated by creature comforts, “Isn’t there a higher purpose to living than peace of mind?”

Newmar’s character was so popular that she returned later that year – *Route 66*’s only recurring character other than Tod and Buz. The Silliphant episode was titled “Give the Old Cat a Tender Mouse.”

“Why should we stop in one place when there are so many things to be. ... [It’s] not so difficult, turning from a porpoise into wind, but you just try sometime changing from wind into sodium phosphate! Even though I’ve been sodium phosphate seven times, I still find myself acting more like nitric acid.” (She’s not high. She abhors stimulants.) Prophetically, she adds: “Have I come too early, or am I an event on the way?”

That’s what she was. An event on the way.

Four episodes later, Silliphant voiced similar concepts in “Suppose I Said I Was the Queen of Spain.” Lois Nettleton plays a drama student who performs probably the longest soliloquy in series TV history. It goes, in part:

“Ladies and gentlemen! This is a play very much like human life. ... Most important of all, it’s not what it appears to be. You see me here, alone. Yet, if you watch, if you listen, you will discover a person within a person, a reason within a reason. ... You are free to choose what you may from my play. ... You are also free to cast your own players. Who are they? Can you hear what they say? Are they children? Do they want everything, as children do? ... Yes! They do want everything. But, reaching for everything, they can have nothing. Because if you say ‘Yes’ to one thing, to one person, are you not at the very same moment saying ‘No’ to ten thousand other things, other people you have yet to meet? But since my players can say ‘No’ to nothing, they can’t say ‘Yes’ to anything.

“Ladies and gentlemen ... Don’t follow the players and ask, ‘What did you mean?’ because they are migratory, and they do not know what it means either, except that they fly south, and they fly north, and they fly south again. ... Now, before the curtain rises, this last hint: When a child plays with a doll, the child knows that the doll is not alive, but she wants so much to believe that the doll lives that, for a while, the doll does live in the child’s mind. In this fashion, if I were to say I was the Queen of Spain, in my heart I know it’s not true, but I can still” – she pauses – “live the enchantment.”

Viewers tuned in thirty-odd weeks a year because Silliphant was saying something they needed and wanted to hear.

However you judge his sentiments and ideas, they’re rooted in an excited sense of, and respect for, what it means to be human. In 1962’s “Voice at the End of the Line,” written by Larry Marcus, Tod speaks of “a child, standing alone, as if the joy and fury of being a child had left him for a moment and the solemnity of being a human being caught him unawares.”

How to deal with these changing perspectives was simple but not easy. In “Where Is Chick Lorimer, Where Has She Gone” (1962, written by Larry Marcus), Vera Miles tells us how: “Onward, with guts and dignity.”

But that’s difficult when you’re panicky.

“Who in His Right Mind Needs a Nice Girl?” (1964, written by Joel Carpenter):
“Everybody’s in a panic. It’s in the air. You breathe it and it gets into your blood and your bones.”

Route 66 portrayed Americans journeying, lost in an expanding sense of consciousness as thrilling as it was scary, as inviting as it was unknown. Silliphant didn’t think this was a bad thing.

“Ever Ride the Waves in Oklahoma?” (1962, written by Silliphant): “We have to know we’re lost before we can find ourselves. That sort of map you make up as you go along.”

Within the decade, blacks, hippies, feminists, and gays would declare that the straight white male hierarchy, which had been the American way of life, was over. For keeps.

Ever since, we’ve made up our maps as we’ve gone along, sketching them hurriedly, tearing them up, sketching them anew, losing and finding like crazy as we ride to who knows where?

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