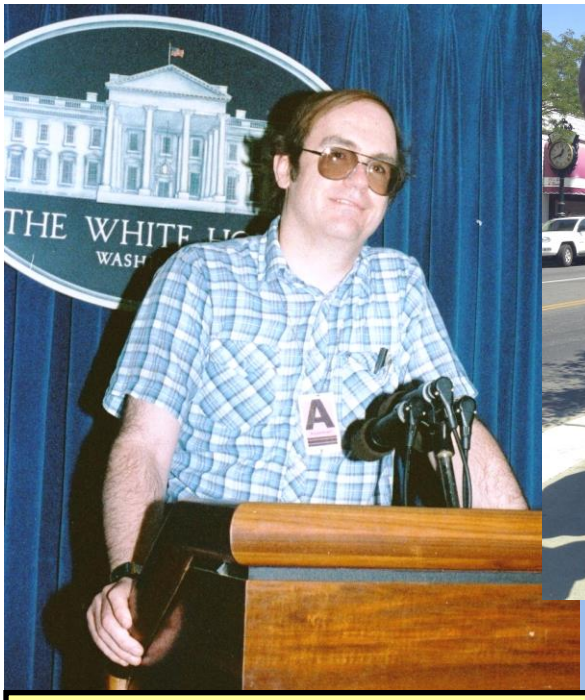

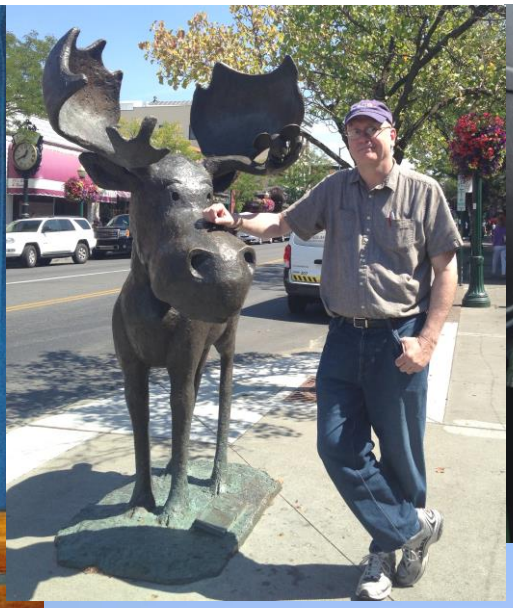

My Back Pages #15

Rich Lynch

My Back Pages #15

articles and essays by Rich Lynch

I'll start off this issue with a *mea culpa*. Even though I don't include a letters column in *My Back Pages*, I do get mail. In fact, I was taken to task, recently, by a friend who was wondering if his letter of comment had ended up in the round file. So I want to reassure those who have taken the time and effort to write that I do read your correspondence. Thank you, and I appreciate the feedback even if I am sometimes not very good at acknowledging it.

Anyway, fifteen issues into the run, I figure it's probably time to describe exactly what *MBP* is, and also what it is not. Strictly speaking, it isn't a fanzine at all – it's an archive collection of previously published writings that is masquerading as a fanzine. As such, it wasn't designed to have a letters column – my intention, someday, is to publish a one-off fanzine that includes the best of the letters that I received during the run. As for how *MBP* is being published, it's mostly an e-zine that is part of the **efanzines.com** website. I have a *very* small print run, about 15 hardcopies per issue. These are mostly intended as trades for the few printed fanzines that I receive and for a couple of people who review fanzines. And also one for my sister Beth, who is the reason I started doing collections of my writings in the first place.

Meanwhile, another holiday season is upon us. For most people it will extend only to New Year's Day, but for my wife Nicki and me, it goes through the first full week in January. We always use that week for a midwinter vacation in New York City. Last year, as you will read, we had a helluva time there.

Rich Lynch
Gaithersburg, Maryland
December 2015

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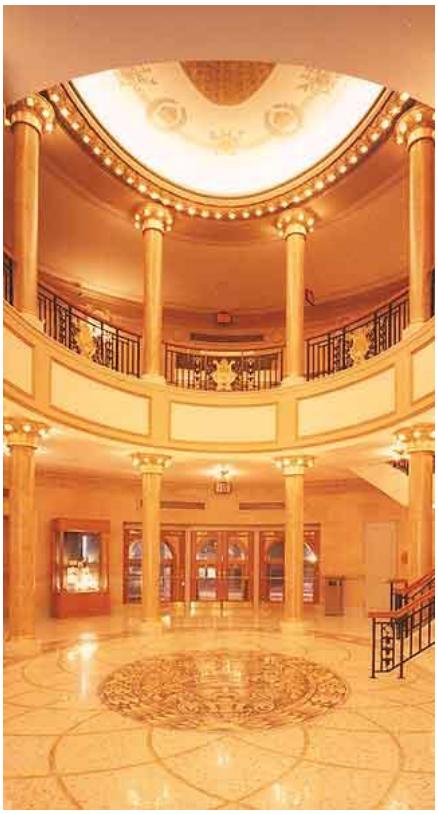
P.O. Box 3120, Gaithersburg, Maryland 20885 USA; rw_lynch (at) yahoo (dot) com

It's a Helluva Town

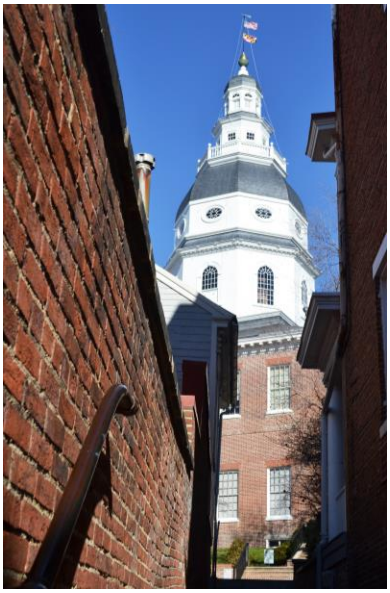
Prolog: What's in a Name?

It might seem contradictory but of all of the Broadway theatres in New York (and there are about 40 of them), only a very few are actually located *on* Broadway. The Lyric Theatre is a case in point – it's on West 42nd Street, about a block from The Great White Way. It's also the largest of the Broadway theatres, seating more than 1,900, and there's a reason for that. The Lyric has only been in existence since the beginning of 1997, and it's as large as it is because it was built on the site of *two* much older theatres that had fallen into disrepair and had been condemned. The architects, to their credit, kept and restored many of the older theatres' design elements, some of them truly glorious.



inside the Lyric Theatre

The Lyric has only had that name since March 2014. Before that it was the Foxwoods Theatre, and before that the Hilton Theatre, and before *that* the Ford Center for the Performing Arts. Productions staged in these previous name incarnations of the theatre have included musical adaptations of *Young Frankenstein* and *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark.* In fact, the Lyric, under its present name, has so far hosted only a single Broadway production, *On the Town*, and on the evening of Tuesday, January 6th, Nicki and I were there to see it. But first there had been some obstacles to overcome…



Maryland State House

Naptown

Annapolis, Maryland, is a pleasant place to spend a day, even in late-December. Nicki and I were there ten days before our New York trip, and it was mostly, until late in the afternoon, a very fine day in some unseasonably warm weather.

Annapolis dates back to the mid-1600s, founded by Puritans from Virginia's eastern shore who were not happy with life under the Anglican Church which was dominant there at that time. During the 1700s, Annapolis was an administrative capital of the British mid-Atlantic colonies and after the American Revolution it became Maryland's capital. It's the only state capital that was also, briefly, the United States capital (in 1783 and 1784). The Maryland State House, which dates back to 1772, is the oldest state capitol building in continuous use, and it was the place where, in 1783, George Washington resigned his commission as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army.

The Maryland General Assembly was not in session that late in the year so there was not much of a crowd inside the State House. And we immediately

observed that it's really not very big. The Senate and House of Delegates chambers are the largest rooms in the building and each is a work of art, or whatever the architectural equivalent is. There are arches and columns that frame viewing galleries, and each chamber also has a grand Tiffany-style skylight.

Maryland's House of Delegates Chamber

There was a lot more to see in Annapolis than just the State House. I was amused to learn that all the locals refer to the city as 'Naptown', as it's about as far from a serene and sleepy community as can be. The city center, where Main Street meets the Chesapeake Bay waterfront, was teeming with people. The waterfront area is also the location of the United States Naval Academy, but we were more interested in experiencing some of the history of the city through its architecture. One of them was just up the street from the entrance to the Naval Academy – the Hammond-Harwood House, which was constructed in 1774 and was described by Thomas Jefferson as having "the most beautiful doorway in America". Back then it was the home of Jeremiah Townley Chase, one of Maryland's delegates to the Continental Congress of 1783, and later on his descendants. It's now a museum and was featured in Bob Vila's *Guide to Historic Homes of America* TV series. Nicki and I took advantage of a fascinating docent tour of the place, and it was like stepping backwards in time to discover what life was like when the United States was young.

the "most beautiful doorway in America" at the Hammond-Harwood House

Alas, Nicki and I are also no longer young. Even though we're a long way from being geezers we're certainly not nearly as spry as we were when we published our first fanzines back in the 1970s. That may have been a contributing cause of what happened on our walk from the Hammond-Harwood House back to the city center. Nicki didn't notice an uneven spot in the brick-paved sidewalk, tripped and fell flat on her face. It happened so suddenly she didn't even have enough time to brace her fall with her arms. It was really scary and she was in so much pain that at first I thought she'd broken a cheekbone. If that had been the case we would have had to cancel our New York trip but it turned out that the only lasting damage was to her eyeglasses, which were ruined. Even that might have caused us to cancel out of going to New York, but she found an older set that worked well enough and the optician was able to beat its estimate in getting a new set made.

Polar Vortex Redux

snarled traffic on the morning of January 6th

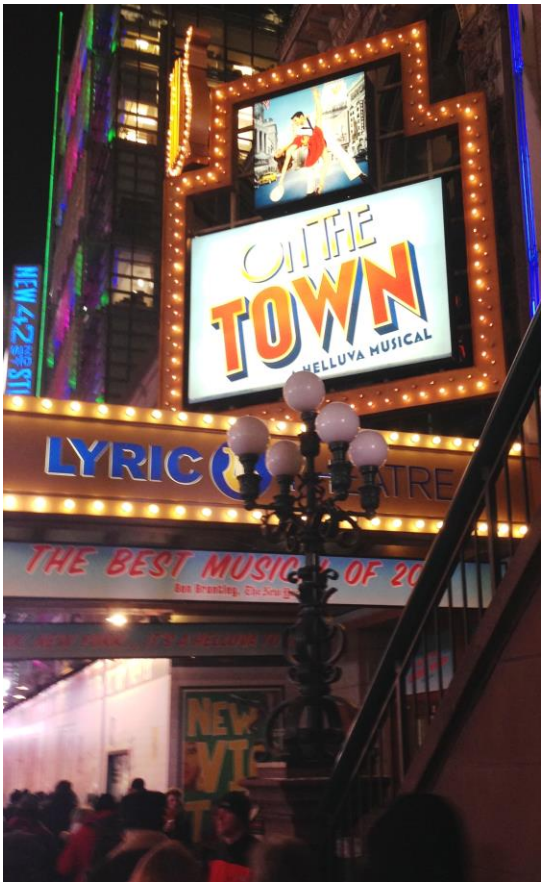
We were hoping the unseasonably warm weather from late December would persist into January, but that's not what happened. Instead, there was another of those frosty polar vortexes like what we endured in last year's trip to New York. Half a week out from our departure day the weather forecast had called for a chance of snow. One day out that had changed to about an inch accumulation in the early morning. We awoke on the morning of our departure to find there was a brisk snowstorm in progress with two inches already down on the ground. It wasn't a huge snowfall but that it happened during the morning rush hours was more than enough to completely disrupt traffic patterns. What should have been about a 45 minute trip to the Amtrak parking garage at BWI Airport took nearly 2½ hours. We missed our train.

It could have been a lot worse, of course. We were not involved in a traffic accident, and once we finally made it to the Interstate it was a relatively steady if slow drive to the airport. It cost about an extra $80 to get the Amtrak tickets re-issued for a later train but it would have been more than that had not we both been eligible for seniors discounts. By the time we reached our hotel in Times Square it was nearly 4:00pm, and the TKTS discount Broadway tickets booth had already been open for about an hour. But then our luck finally changed.

at the TKTS ticket booth in Times Square

I have become a firm believer that karma exists and that it is inevitably a zero-sum game. In the end, there's only so much good luck or bad luck that can descend on you until something occurs to offset the streak. And that's what happened. It turned out that not only were half-price tickets still available for *On the Town*, there were some really *good* ones to be had. A block of them had become available sometime around 4:00pm and when we got ours we found that they were second row, center. If we hadn't missed our train, we would have been at TKTS too early and we wouldn't have gotten them.

Celebs On Stage



outside the Lyric Theatre on January 6th

We took in four Broadway shows during our New York trip, all of them themed in some way about the city. *On the Town* was an entertaining restaging of the Leonard Bernstein-Betty Comden-Adolph Green classic 1944 musical comedy about three sailors with a 24-hour shore leave in New York and wanting to experience the city in the fullest. And they do, complete with the requisite misadventures and romances.

There weren't any celebrities in the cast of *On the Town*, but there was no lack of them in the other three shows that we saw. The very next evening we enjoyed another revival, of a non-musical this time. It was George S. Kaufman's and Moss Hart's *You Can't Take It With You*, set in New York during the middle of the 1930s and filled with engaging characters. It's a comedy about a romance-in progress between the son of an upper-class family and the daughter of an eccentric tinkerer who manufactures fireworks in the basement of his home. What put it on our shortlist for this trip was the cast, which was headlined by the great James Earl Jones and also featured Richard Thomas. That, and its pedigree – its original Broadway production back in 1936 won a Pulitzer Prize and was the inspiration of a 1938 movie adaptation directed by Frank Capra that went on to win the Best Picture Academy Award.

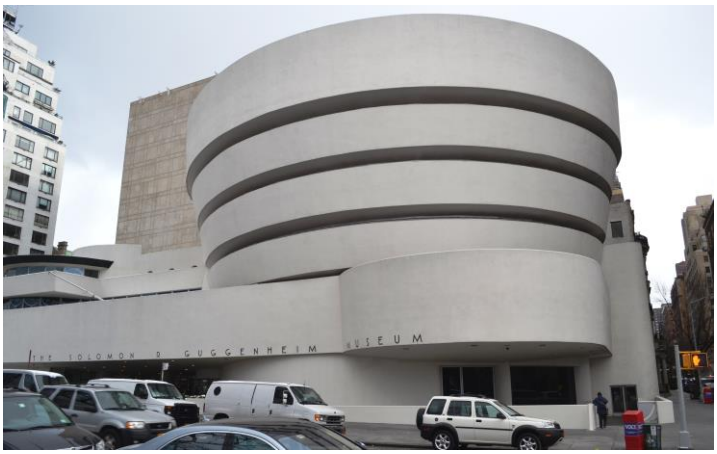
The other non-musical we took in, *It's Only a Play*, was on the final evening of our trip and had an equally stellar cast that included F. Murray Abraham, Stockard Channing, and Martin Short. But this one was a modern-day comedy and it was so filled with contemporary in-groupish references about Broadway and New York that I think it's doubtful the show could be staged in a different city. The plot hinged around what happened at the reception following what turned out to be a disastrous opening night for a new Broadway play. It was all a bit too much 'meta' for my taste and the characters a bit too caricaturish. But it *was* entertaining, even though the actors were much better than the material they had to work with.

There was one other show we saw, another musical, on our next-to-last evening in the city. And we had some angst over deciding which one to see. *Cabaret* with Alan Cumming was nearing the end of its run, Idina Menzel was still headlining *If/Then*, and last year's Tony Award winner, *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*, was still in production. But we decided that we probably wouldn't have been all that interested in *If/Then* if not for Menzel's presence, and we learned that lower level seats were not available for *Gentlemen's Guide* nor were seats of *any* kind for *Cabaret*. So, in the end we decided what the heck, let's go see Tony Danza in *Honeymoon in Vegas*. It's a musical adaptation of the 1992 Nicolas Cage movie, with Danza in the role of the casino boss that was played by James Caan in the movie. And Danza really is an

entertainer – he can sing and dance, and he was visibly enjoying himself on stage. The show was still in previews and it seemed obvious that it needed tightening in a few places, but making a musical out of what had been a popular comedic movie really worked and I expect it will have enough legs to still be there a year from now when Nicki and I are next in town.

Zero the Hero and Other Exhibitions

The cold weather severely limited what we could do during our stay in the city. Being outdoors for very long was pretty much a non-starter, but there were alternatives. A section of 5th Avenue that borders Central Park from 82nd to 105th Streets is known as the 'Museum Mile' and there are at least nine notable museums and galleries in that stretch. So we visited The Guggenheim, which in its permanent collection includes works by Dali, Cézanne, Degas, and Van Gogh. But most of the museum was taken up by a large exhibition titled "Zero: Countdown to Tomorrow, 1950s-60s", an avant-garde extended multimedia display that emphasized visual texture and motion more than structure and appearance. The title of the exhibition comes from the so-called "Zero Network" of artists in the 1950s-60s that originated the movement. As for me, a little modernism goes a long way, and this turned out to be way, way too much. In the end, the star of the show was the museum itself. The Frank Lloyd Wright design, with its huge atrium and continuous spiral ramp from the ground to the top level, had caused some architecture critics to write that the building might well overshadow any exhibitions within. For this show they were right.



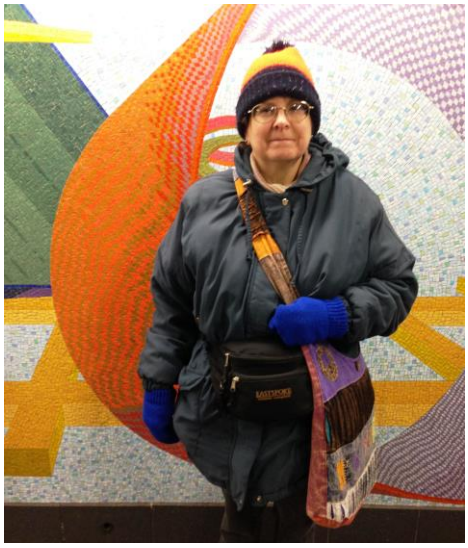
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum


interior of The Guggenheim

We did much better the next day at The Frick Collection, housed in a converted mansion formerly owned by early 20th century industrialist Henry Clay Frick. He was also an art connoisseur and spared no expense in filling his home with major works by famous European artists, as well as antique furniture, sculpture, and decorative objects. I think my favorite of all the wonderful works in the collection is a self-portrait by Rembrandt, painted late in his life. He looks very wizened and resigned, and I think I can relate to that.


Grand Stairway in the Frick Collection
(the painting is a Renoir)

What to Do When It's Cold



Nicki and a wall mosaic at the Lexington Avenue / 59th Street subway station

We had great plans on what we could have done in New York if it had only been a bit warmer. Even a trip out to see the Statue of Liberty might have been in the mix if the outdoor temperature had been about 20 degrees higher and the wind speeds about 15 mph less. Instead, our outdoor excursions were mostly limited by how far we dared to stray from subway stations before the bitterly cold conditions forced us to take shelter somewhere.

Even at that there were things to do and see. Just walking through subway stations often takes you past some stunning mosaic artwork that had been commissioned by New York's "Arts for Transit" program. And we also happened across the only surviving branch of the Shakespeare & Co. independent bookstore chain. There used to be four of them in New York, but the other stores – in Greenwich Village, Gramercy, and Brooklyn – all closed down last year. The one remaining store, on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, appears to owe its continuing existence to its proximity to Hunter College. But there have been some news reports that it, too, may be on the verge of extinction, its business threatened by rising rents and the big Internet booksellers.

at the Shakespeare & Co. bookstore

We were there mainly to browse a bit as we warmed up from the icy conditions outside, but there were enough interesting-looking titles to peruse that we stayed much longer than we had intended. In the end we didn't come away with any new reading material, but Nicki did buy a magnet that she is using as inspiration for her small crafting business. It reads: "Don't be pushed by your problems, be led by your dreams."

We didn't exactly run out of things to do because of the cold weather, but our last full day in the city was a low impact one. On previous trips we've walked around some of the neighborhoods in Manhattan, so we decided to spend a few hours in a place we hadn't yet visited – Hell's Kitchen. It covers the area between about 34th and 59th Streets from 8th Avenue westward to the Hudson River, and gentrification since the 1960s has transformed it from a rough gang-infested place to a peaceful bedroom community. We were able to find a very nice deli on corner of 9th Avenue and 43rd Street, and just across the street from there a small antiques-and-collectibles store that had a large selection of old *Playbill* magazines about Broadway shows from years and sometimes decades past. One of them was for the 1992 revival of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, whose star-studded cast included Jessica Lange, Alec Baldwin, Amy Madigan, and James Gandolfini. When Nicki and I saw that we looked at each other and I could tell we were thinking the same thing: "Damn! We started these New York vacations sixteen years too late!"

Epilog: Two Revisitations

Nicki and I've been taking these annual mini-vacations in New York since 2008 and in that time we've been to 24 different Broadway shows. But until this year, all of them had been at different theatres – this was the first year we'd visited any theatre more than once. It actually happened two times, at the Longacre where *You Can't Take It with You* was playing (we'd previously seen *La Cage aux Folles* there in 2010) and the Nederlander for *Honeymoon in Vegas* (where we'd seen *Million Dollar Quartet* in 2012). I'm taking this to mean that we're now seasoned Broadway veterans.

Nederlander Theatre marquee for *Honeymoon in Vegas*

I have no doubt we'll also eventually wind up at the Lyric Theatre again, though it might be a while before *On the Town* finishes its run there. But I'm even more certain that next January, polar vortex or no, we'll be back for more of whatever The Big Apple has to offer. We'll take our cue from the signature song in *On the Town*:

"New York, New York, it's a helluva town, the Bronx is up and the Battery down. The people ride in a hole in the ground. New York, New York, it's a helluva town!"

For sure. ☼

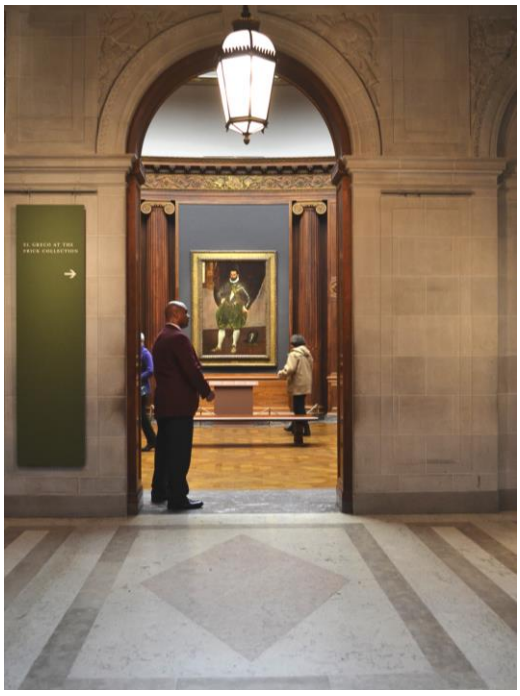
Afterword:

It turned out that neither *On the Town* nor *Honeymoon in Vegas* had the legs to last an entire year. The Tony Danza show only made it through a bit more than 90 performances before it closed. I guess that tightening it up wasn't really the answer.

On the other hand, museums like The Frick Collection are playing indefinite extended runs and there are many of them that we haven't yet visited. And there are others, like The Frick Collection, that deserve a revisit.

As for Annapolis, we'll be going back there again to explore more of its history and architecture. Hopefully on a day when the karma is a bit more favorable.

We're coming up on a leap year, so next is a short appreciation I wrote back on February 29, 2004 about someone whose karma was apparently always favorable. It must come with the territory for people who are born on leap day.


a view from the central courtyard in The Frick Collection

Born on the 29th of February

Today is the birthday of Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868), who was born near Bologna, Italy. He is perhaps the most famous person born on the leap day, but back when he was alive he was the most famous composer in the world, even more so than his contemporary Beethoven.

Rossini had musician parents, which meant that he was introduced to music at an early age and was provided an education which was aimed toward a career in music. And being an Italian, he became thoroughly acquainted with opera – at age 13 he appeared in an operatic production and by age 18 he had completed his first opera. The breakthrough came in 1812, when Rossini was 20 years old, with his operas *Tancredi* and *Il Signor Bruscino*. Both were very successful and over the next ten years many others followed, including what is perhaps the most famous comic opera ever, *The Barber of Seville*.

By 1823, Rossini had apparently decided he had nothing else to prove in Italy, so he accepted the directorship of an opera company in Paris. There, in 1829, he completed an opera whose Overture was later co-opted by 20th Century entertainment media, making the melody one of the most famous in all of classical music – *William Tell*. That opera was Rossini's crowning achievement, at least in terms of compositional greatness. One of Rossini's biographers described it as "a rich tapestry of his most inspired music, with elaborate orchestration, many ensembles, spectacular ballets and processions in the French tradition, opulent orchestral writing and showing a new harmonic boldness."

But after that there was only silence. By his thirties Rossini had amassed enough money to live comfortably the rest of his life, and that's exactly what he did. In the remaining 38 years of his life he produced only a relatively few minor works – and he never wrote another opera. Instead, he spent most of the last half of his existence living the good life – reportedly, his Saturday night parties became nearly as famous to the music world as his operas.

Today, nearly 150 years after his death, Rossini's music continues to be extremely popular, especially to casual listeners of classical music, because of his enchanting melodies. He was successful because he wrote for the entertainment of his audience. He said, "Delight must be the basis and aim of this art. Simple melody, clear rhythm!" And his ability to do so was legendary; he was reported to have said, "Give me a laundry list and I will set it to music." The French composer Lesueur gave support to that bit of wit and wisdom, saying that Rossini's "ardent genius had opened a new road and marked a new epoch in musical art," but in the end, it was the material world that won out. Rossini decided that he was fonder of women and food than of composing: "What do you expect," he said, "of one born on leap day?" ☼

Afterword:

Nicki and I have a tenuous connection to Rossini. Back in 1988, at Chattacon 13, we used a recording of the Overture from *William Tell* over the opening segment of the "live" 4th issue of our fanzine *Mimosa*. And on the subject of fanzines, next is one of the seven fanzine review columns I wrote pseudonymously (as "Roy G. Bivens") back in the late 1980s and early 1990s for the Birmingham, Alabama fanzine *Anvil* (which was edited by my friend Charlotte Proctor). As you can probably surmise, this one was written in 1991 not long after the successful conclusion of the first Gulf War ("Operation Desert Storm").

World of the Future, World of the Past

I've got to hand it to my good friend Charlotte. Whenever she tells me she needs the fanzine review column "...like in the near future, OK?" it gets the old thought processes worked up again. This time, it stimulated some long dormant synapses with links to science fiction of times long past. I think it was Bob Tucker, or maybe Robert Heinlein (help me out, readers) who once said that science fiction is a time-binding avocation. I think I can vouch for that. I was invited to a friend's house not too long ago, to help him sort through boxes of old pulp magazines that had been in stasis for several decades in a corner of his attic. In one box, I came across a few gems from over fifty years ago – copies of *Amazing Stories* with Frank R. Paul covers, depicting wondrous cities of the future with weird-looking skyscrapers and flying vehicles. You know, more and more I really think that we are now living in the so-called "world of the future" that Hugo Gernsback solicited stories about way back in the 1920s and 1930s. We've got thinking machines that can defeat all but a handful of human beings at the centuries-old game of chess; we've got walls that turn into windows on the world that, with a punch of a button, provide over 50 different choices of entertainment or news programs to watch; we've got wars fought with smart bombs and invisible-to-the-enemy aircraft, that start and are over in a matter of hours.

And it's interesting to live in this "world of the future". I'm not much at chess, but I can push buttons as well as anyone. So as I watching CNN describe Saddam's latest speech – the one where he was telling how great Iraq's military forces were and how fiercely they had beaten back American forces in the Mother of All Battles, repeatedly striking our fists with their chins – I couldn't help thinking that a half century ago this war might have taken years to fight, with great numbers of casualties and no clear assurance of victory. Already around here, there are signs that there will be parades and celebrations to welcome home the troops, just like when World War II ended. Back then, soldiers were made as welcome as possible when they returned, with discounted or free tickets to sporting events, and free taxi rides. There was an oft-repeated story (stop me if you've heard this before) of the GI who had just arrived back in New York after the end of the war in Europe. Still in uniform, the first thing he wanted to do was wash the taste of army rations out of his mouth with a good seafood dinner. When the cabbie asked him where he wanted to go, the soldier answered, "Take me where I can get ***scrod***." And so the cabbie turned around as if to size up the fellow's intentions, and answered, "You know, in all my years of driving that's the first time I ever hear usage of the past pluperfect."

If all this seems like a long way to go to lead into a fanzine review column, you're right. But it did seem to be a way to frame a review column about two of the more literary science fiction fanzines.

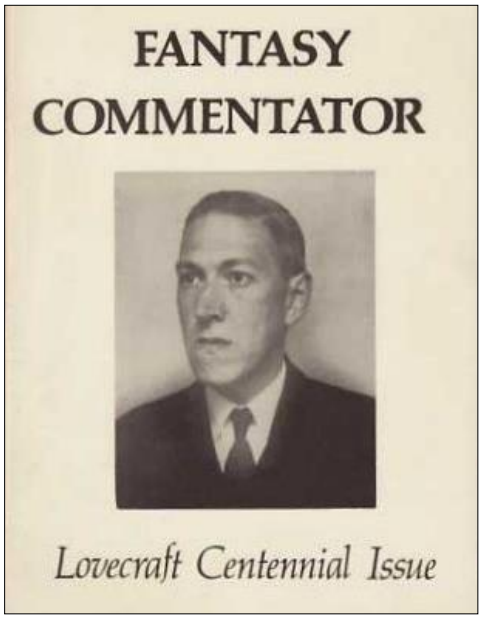
The first of them is issue #31 of Leland Sapiro's *Riverside Quarterly*. And the first thing I should say is that it's probably not for everybody. *RQ* appears to be aimed at the academic scholar, since there are articles (complete with footnotes) about the gothic novel as it relates to science fiction, and a literary comparison of two H.G. Wells novels, *The War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine*. Besides that, there are quite a few short works of poetry, a highly-forgettable short story, and even a look back at the "Coneheads" skits from *Saturday Night Live*. All in all, a pretty mixed bag.

And this is not an easy zine to read. The two academic articles are actually fairly interesting; Pat Hodgell's gothic novel essay seemed aimed at the works of Charles Dickens, but provided a

pretty good background to exactly what a gothic novel is, as well as the differences between terror and horror as a genre. Colin Manlove's comparison of two H.G. Wells novels pointed out some contrasts and similarities between the two novels that in some ways make them seem as two halves of a whole. However, academic papers are often quite dry (to put it politely) in style, and these live up to that reputation – you've really got to *want* to read these articles to make it through them. Also, it was more than a little difficult to even understand all this material, because the text in *RQ* is reproduced in tiny reduced-courier typeface on gold-colored bond that was real hard on my eyesight and my ability to concentrate on what I was reading.

Other than the academic articles, the rest of the issue appeared fairly ordinary. The one short story showed once again the large difference in quality you get between fiction published in prozines vs. that found in fanzines. There was quite a bit of poetry, of variable quality; the format of the zine seemed to be that each article was separated by three-pages-by-god of poetry before encountering another essay. The letters section at the end of the zine was nicely put together, with correspondence from quite a few recognizable names, both fan and pro. The artwork used to break up pages of text was of pretty good quality, but often bore little if any relation to the neighboring text.

If, after all of this, you've come to believe this is at best a mixed review for *Riverside Quarterly*, you're right. Still, this is probably a worthwhile fanzine to subscribe to; with all the different varieties of things in each issue, there's likely something there for you. But it would be a better zine yet if the editor would get rid of things of lesser interest and quality, and publish in a slightly kinder format to the senses.



Much better is A. Langley Searles' *Fantasy Commentator*. Now *this* is a fanzine you can point to when somebody asks you why should trees die in the name of fandom. Where *Riverside Quarterly* apparently runs articles about science fiction of interest to literary academia types, *Fantasy Commentator* publishes articles about science fiction and fantasy of interest to historians. The current issue (#41) exemplifies this, as it's the Lovecraft Centennial Issue, in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of H.P. Lovecraft. There are no less than six different articles about Lovecraft in this issue on a broad spectrum of topics, running the gamut from R. Alain Everts' recounting of the last days of Lovecraft, to Sam Moskowitz' recap of the 1990 Lovecraft Centennial Celebration held in Providence, to Wilfred Talman's recounting of the time Lovecraft and Frank Belknap Long were "psychoanalyzed" via a simple word association test, to a collections of sonnets by contemporaries of Lovecraft, including Robert E. Howard, Stanton A. Coblentz, and Clark Ashton Smith. I have to admit that until now I hadn't really been all that interested in Lovecraftiana but after browsing through all this material, I've developed a curiosity about the man that may eventually get me to find some books by and about him. Which, I guess, is one of the purposes of this special issue.

Anyway, besides all the Lovecraft material, there are also some other things of interest in the issue. For instance, there are *two* continuing series by Sam Moskowitz, one of them about

Bernarr Macfadden (editor of pulp magazines in the time of Hugo Gernsback), and the other self-explanatorily entitled "Voyagers Through Eternity – A History of Science Fiction From the Beginnings to H.G. Wells." There's also an interesting article by Mike Ashley excerpted from an upcoming book about Hugo Gernsback that described Gernsback's editorial policies and preferred story topics for his line of pulp magazines, which included stories about that "world of the future" I mentioned a little earlier. Even the letters column is of interest to science fiction historians, as the ubiquitous Sam Moskowitz appears in print once again, with a long remembrance of his last visit with the late Donald A. Wollheim.

There's more to *Fantasy Commentator* than just history, though. I was a little disappointed by the complete lack of illustrations or photographs in the issue, other than the photo of Lovecraft on the front cover. However, the writing more than makes up for it. The essays and narratives in this fanzine contain some of the best writing I've seen in any non-professional publication. Moskowitz has been one of science fiction's best essayists for decades, and has been a continuing presence in *FC* for more than 40 years. *The Immortal Storm*, perhaps the most famous historical book about science fiction ever written, appeared first in serial form there; with his two multi-part historical series, he continues to show that a) his writing continues to be as interesting and well-crafted as it was 40 years ago, and b) he hasn't run out of historical doings to write about yet. He and other contributors provide that kind of high-quality, stay-up-late-at-night-to-finish-reading-the-issue writing you just don't see all that much anymore even in professional publications, much less fanzines. This is without a doubt one of the best fanzines published, and by all means I recommend you take steps to acquire a copy.

(Editor's note: Well, this hasn't exactly been the Mother of All Fanzine Review Columns, and Mr. Bivens isn't always this short-winded; either he's been staying up too late at night watching CNN, or else he's been spending too much of his time trying to think up more literary war jokes instead of reading fanzines. Now that the war is over, though, he should be back to his loquacious self before too much longer. And yes, he'll be back again with more fanzine reviews next issue.) ☼

Afterword:

So why a pseudonym? It was mostly so that I could fictionalize the opening set-up paragraphs for the fanzine review columns. Or, in some cases, partly fictionalize – the part about helping a friend sort through a box of old pulp magazines is mostly true.

As I mentioned, this column was composed soon after the first Gulf War. And more than a decade *before* the second Gulf War, the one precipitated by trumped-up claims of 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' that were supposedly in the control of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. I had not re-read it until editing it for this collection, so I was gobsmacked when I saw that I had written that: "I couldn't help thinking that a half century ago this war might have taken years to fight, with great numbers of casualties and no clear assurance of victory," which of course pretty accurately described the forthcoming second Gulf War. I had no idea that I was prescient.

One other snippet from this column was my observation that: "We've got thinking machines that can defeat all but a handful of human beings at the centuries-old game of chess." That was true in 1991, but just a few years later it was demonstrated that not even the highest-ranked Grandmaster could beat a supercomputer at chess. This is a far cry from the year 1970 (as you will read next) when chess-playing computers were hardly any better than patzers.

My Short Career as a Chess Non-Prodigy

"What a *patzer*!"

Trash talk isn't limited to professional basketball players. Chess players do it too. At least, in the early 1970s we did, back when I was part of the Clarkson College chess club in upstate New York.

A 'patzer' is an inept chess player and that's how I had played. The words had stung, but I had probably deserved it. I had just made a particularly horrible move against someone ranked well below me, and it had cost me the match. There had been several others in the club who had been hanging around and hovering over the action, such that it is in a slow-moving chess match, and I remember that it had all been more than a bit distracting. That, and I had been in too much of a hurry to get the match over with because I really needed to pee.

a much nicer 1963 Ford Falcon than the one I owned

Truth be told, I was a far better chess player than a 'patzer', but I was never very close to being expert level. None of us in the club were that, and the only times we got to play against really superior competition were when we could scrape together enough funding to go to a tournament. I was one of the few people in the club who had a car, so for one event, a Thanksgiving weekend tourney down in New York City, I was elected to provide transportation. But New York was about a 700 mile round trip, some of it right through the middle of the Adirondacks, and it did not go well. Two breakdowns and one mountain snowstorm later, I decided that my car, a rusting-out 1963 Ford Falcon, needed a name. After that she was "Pauline", because taking a long-distance trip in her had turned out to be like the Perils of Pauline.

The most ambitious trip we ever took (but in someone else's car) was also to the largest tournament we ever played in – the 1970 Pan-American Intercollegiate Team Chess Championship, held over Christmas recess that year. It was hosted by Northwestern University, north of Chicago, and it was the first time in my life that I had been to another state. (Yes, northern New York was *that* isolated!) Our team, as expected, did not do very well but it was still memorable because it was one of the first large tournaments where one of the players was a computer.

The machine was part of the Northwestern team, and back then the playing strength of computers was really not that much greater than my level of play. It managed to win only one game and was the cause of much commotion. The computer terminal was located off in a computer lab somewhere, and there was a runner who would carry a piece of paper with the machine's move into the tournament hall and then bring another piece of paper with the opponent's move back to the computer lab. Tournament games are on the clock (each player has to make a certain number of moves in a prescribed time), so to preserve precious seconds the courier would sprint at top speed into and out of the tournament hall. This very nearly resulted

in what would have been a spectacular wipeout of himself and a match-in-progress when he swerved to avoid someone who had unwittingly moved into his path.

We had enough players on our team where two of us could sit out each round. When it was my turn to be on the sideline I discovered that there was a local chess newsletter being published which listed results of Chicago-area tournaments and other things of interest. That's when I found out that chess trash talk wasn't just a northern New York phenomenon. The newsletter had no lack of it, quite a bit of which was directed at Northwestern's best player, an expert-level graduate student with an instantly unforgettable name – George R.R. Martin.

I wish I could claim to have played a match against Mr. Martin in the tournament, but that's not what happened. The Clarkson team didn't get paired against Northwestern, and even if we had I would have been jonesing to play against the computer, not him. I vaguely remember that he and I chatted briefly about something, but details have long ago passed from my memory. I'm sure he didn't mention anything about writing science fiction – he had sold his first story earlier that year – because I *know* I would have remembered that.

My short career as a chess non-prodigy came to an end about a year after that. I became a graduate student at Clarkson, and the combination of some tough courses and part-time work as a research assistant to a taskmaster professor forced me to make some draconian choices on what extracurricular activities I had time for. But what *really* caused me to give up on chess was the aftermath of a tough tournament loss to a highly-ranked player. In the re-hash of the game, he allowed that my play had gotten his chess pieces into an inferior position, but he had turned the tables with a bold move that had caused me to go on the defensive. That it was actually a horrible play on his part and should have cost him the match was something that I had completely missed. You can't play good chess if you're that clueless. It was time to move on.

George R.R. Martin's stories had started appearing in science fiction magazines about that same time, but it was a non-fiction article in a 1972 issue of *Analog* that made me a fan of him. He wrote an entertaining account of the early era of computer chess titled "The Computer Was a Fish" (in this context, 'fish' has similar meaning to 'patzer'), which included mention of the 1970 Pan-American tourney. It was almost enough to make me re-think my decision to abandon chess. But by then I was seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, as far as finishing my Masters degree was concerned, and my mind was more on finding career employment than on games of strategy. Also, I had gotten involved in the local college radio station (I was, at times, the late-night and the early morning DJ), and it was there that I met my future wife, Nicki.

And that, most definitely, is another story. ☼

Afterword:

Someday I'm going to have to write an essay about Pauline. I owned her for less than four years but with all the adventures I had with the car it seemed more like four decades. The most outrageous one happened not long before I finally gave up on her. I was driving down a boulevard on the north side of Chattanooga when the left rear wheel came off and bounded away, just missing oncoming traffic in the other lanes.

Nowadays I have adventures that usually do not involve automobile breakdowns. One happened last year, on a business trip to Illinois when I had to be in constant crisis management mode because of all the unexpected problems to deal with...including a *bus* breakdown.

The City of Kings and Dukes

Prolog: Seventeen years ago...

***A postcard I sent from Warsaw, Poland, on October 31, 1997*:** It's All Hallow's Eve here in Eastern Europe, but there's nary a witch nor goblin to be seen. About the scariest thing I've seen are all the closed money changer kiosks, as I was desperate to change some dollars into zlotys so I could buy a train ticket to Gdansk for early tomorrow morning. I thought I'd have a horrific time purchasing the ticket, late as it was on a Friday night, but it really wasn't a problem. I'd already written down the departure time I wanted, and when I got to the ticket window at the train station, I told the sales lady in my best Polish enunciation, "*Jeden bileta Gdańsk, drugi klassa, prosze*." ("One second-class ticket to Gdansk, please.") It worked! In fact, it worked so well that the guy behind me said something to me (in English) that I would *never* have expected to hear: "Your Polish is pretty good!" Now hearing *that* was scary!

This Could Be the Last Time

I've previously been to Warsaw many times but only once in October. Back in 1997, Halloween was just another autumn evening there, but in the intervening seventeen years the city has become so westernized that carved Jack O'Lanterns were a commonplace sight. I found out back in July that I'd be making this end-of-October trip to Warsaw for a four-day meeting of the multinational carbon sequestration organization for which I am Secretariat. But this time there was no free time for sightseeing excursions of any kind. It was a trip so tightly programmed that it seemed like there was barely enough time to even breathe, there were so many things that needed to be done.

And most likely, this late in my working career, it was my final time in Poland.

at the carbon sequestration meeting in Warsaw

An Italian in ~~Algiers~~ Decatur

I can't be *entirely* certain of that, though, because another part of my job responsibilities is as project manager / organizer for bilaterals. These are annual meetings between the Energy Department's fossil energy experts and their counterparts in countries of interest. The bilaterals I'm currently handling are with Norway and Italy, but there have been some glimmerings that a new one with Poland might be a possibility. A bilateral usually involves a day-long sit-down meeting to review and plan yearly progress, a workshop or seminar of some kind (sometimes more than one), and a field trip to a project site.

This year's bilateral with Italy was really only a pre-bilateral because there isn't a formal agreement in place yet to continue the series past this year. The meeting went well enough that I have no doubt there will be another one sometime next year over there. But the memorable part of the event was the field trip. Following the meeting in Washington, we traveled by bus all the

way out to Morgantown, West Virginia, where the next morning there were briefings and a tour at the National Energy Technology Laboratory (where resides one of the fastest supercomputers in the world). And then it was back on the bus to the Pittsburgh airport to catch a late afternoon flight which took us to Chicago, where another bus brought us south to the city of Decatur. That's where the Archer Daniels Midland Company is located and it's also where a very large carbon sequestration project, sited at ADM's industrial ethanol plant, has permanently stored a million tons of CO_2 about a mile-and-a-half underground in a very stable geologic formation.

All of this was as interesting to me as it was to the Italian delegation, but I couldn't pay it as much attention as I would have liked because I was in crisis management mode for most of the Illinois leg of the trip. One of the Italians had managed to lose his passport on the flight to Chicago. (It took about a half-dozen telephone calls, as I was passed up and down the food chain, before I was finally able to find the right person to talk to. It turned out that the passport had been found by the airline cleaning crew.) The bus driver couldn't check into the hotel in Decatur because of a snafu between the hotel reservation staff and the bus contracting company. (I had to ignore Federal travel directives and front the driver's room cost on my credit card until it could all be straightened out the next morning.) And when it came time for the bus to bring us across town to the meeting site, the driver pointed out a flat tire and said the bus wasn't going anywhere for a while. (I had to secure a taxi for six people plus luggage on very short notice.)

with members of the Italian delegation at the Decatur CO_2 sequestration project

But the biggest issue turned out to be something I couldn't solve – the weather. We flew out of the St. Louis airport and on the two-hour bus ride to get there the skies grew more and more ominously dark. By the time we had reached the boarding gate a line of ferocious thunderstorms had arrived and caused airline schedules to be scrambled. I was lucky in that my flight back to Washington was delayed only by about an hour-and-a-half. The Italians, who were headed for Chicago, had their flight cancelled and didn't make it out of there until the next day.

To Every Thing There is a Season

There was a field trip to an even bigger project during the carbon sequestration meeting in Poland. Bełchatów Power Plant, about a two-hour bus ride from Warsaw, is the third-largest coal-fueled power plant in the world. It has also been ranked, by the European Union, as the most climate-damaging power plant in Europe, with annual CO_2 emissions of more than 37 million tonnes. It's a *perfect* site for a carbon sequestration project.

the field trip to Bełchatów Power Plant

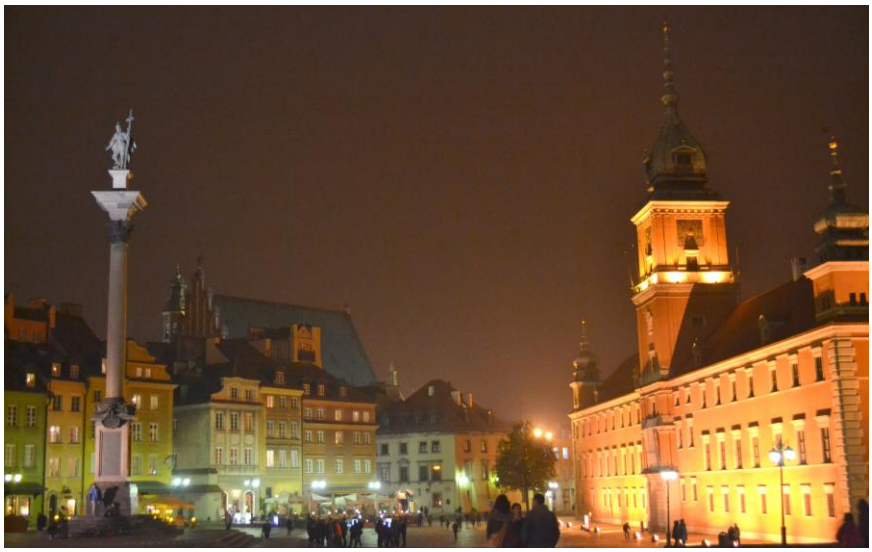
It was therefore enlightening to hear the power plant's management describe why such a project is *not* going forward there, even though a lot of money has already been spent on readying the power plant for carbon sequestration. The big reason was project financing. Even with support by one of the European Union's funding mechanisms, doing a large-scale carbon capture and storage project at Bełchatów would have been incredibly expensive and would have greatly raised the cost of electricity from the power plant. But the project also had formidable difficulties in gaining public acceptance, and ultimately never did. On-shore geologic CO_2 storage is not being done anywhere in Europe yet, chiefly because of public acceptance issues, and the Bełchatów project was just another case in point. The CO_2 storage site was not very close to the power plant, so a pipeline would have been needed to transport the CO_2 which would have passed through or very close to sixteen communities. And nobody wanted it.

the project briefing at the power plant

So in the end, this was not the time for large-scale carbon sequestration in Poland. Not yet, anyway. But newer and less expensive technologies are on the way, and successful on-shore sequestration projects in North America will eventually lead to public confidence that deep underground CO_2 storage is both safe and secure. Perhaps in a few years it will be a time to build up. To every thing there is a season.

Warsaw After Dark

As I mentioned, there wasn't any free time for sightseeing excursions on this trip but I should qualify that by saying that I did manage to squeeze in about an hour, on my last evening in town, to stroll along the Royal Route. It's the road once taken by Poland's kings, back in medieval times, to get from one of the royal palaces to the town square. Today it's a series of avenues, but all the old residences, churches, and other historic landmarks that line the route make it a photogenic place for a walk.



Warsaw's Castle Square, with Sigismund's Column and the Royal Castle

My favorite part of the city, especially after dark, is the Castle Square, bordered by the Royal Castle that over the ages has been the residence of Mazovian Dukes, Polish Kings, and Lithuanian Grand Dukes. In the center of the square is Sigismund's Column, commemorating Poland's King Sigismund III Vasa who in 1596 moved the nation's capital from Kraków to Warsaw. But both of them, as well as most of the buildings in the old town, are reconstructions. The originals were completely destroyed by the Nazis during the Warsaw uprising, near the end of World War Two.

Epilog: The One that Got Away

The very first of my dozen or so trips to Warsaw was back in 1992, just three years after the end of communism, and it was a great adventure to a new and different place. I remember that come nightfall the streets were mostly deserted and you had to look hard to find a restaurant that was open. Twenty-two years has brought a lot of change. I saw throngs of people on my evening stroll along the Royal Route and in Castle Square, and Warsaw has become westernized to the point where there are restaurants and coffee shops practically everywhere.

I couldn't leave Warsaw without completing a mission. Starbucks, which has an impressive number of coffee shops in Poland, sells souvenir mugs themed on cities where the stores are located. My compatriot John, whose work is no longer involved with these multilateral carbon sequestration meetings, collects these mugs but was missing the one for Warsaw – he put off buying one back in 2010, the previous time the carbon sequestration meeting was in Poland, forgot about it until we were on the airplane back to North America and had been mentally kicking himself about it ever since. So on my evening walk down the Royal Route, I stopped at a Starbucks and got him one.

the Warsaw mug from Starbucks

But the thing is, as I was paying for the mug, the young lady at the cash register started talking to me in English! I had not spoken a word before that. When I asked her how she knew I wasn't Polish, she shrugged and said she just did – it was her superpower. I told her I was from the Washington, D.C. area in the United States, and she smiled and said she had relatives there, and someday she would visit there too.

When she does, I hope it's a great adventure. ☼

Afterword:

I've been to Poland so many times that I've lost count. I think it's now up to 13 times, and if I ever go back again there are still some places I've never been that I will want to see.

There are even more places I want to see in the United Kingdom. I've been there far fewer times, and then only to London, Glasgow, and Edinburgh. My most recent trip was this year, back in October, and the bad news was that once again I never got outside London. But the good news was that there was still plenty to experience in a city so rich with culture and history. And also memorable characters, both fictional and real.

Hyde and Seek

I literally stumbled across one of the most fascinating characters that I have ever met.

It happened on a recent trip to London. I was there for three days, accompanying two of my upper managers on an information-gathering assignment. The last two days in town were filled to the brim with meetings, twelve of them total, which pretty much left me drained. But on my first day, a Sunday, I was left to myself to spend the day as I wanted.

So I decided to explore Hyde Park. It was an easy choice because the hotel where I stayed was directly across the avenue from the northeast corner of the park, where Marble Arch is located. The arch alone was worth seeing. It dates back to the 1800s and was originally the state entrance to Buckingham Palace. But a redesign and enlargement of the Palace in the 1840s left no room or need for the arch, so it was dismantled and relocated to where it is today, a sentinel overlooking the Speakers' Corner. And Speakers' Corner is where I met the esteemed Tony Allen.

Marble Arch on a sunny Sunday afternoon in October

I actually more tripped over him than met him. Speakers' Corner is the perhaps the most famous location for free speech anywhere in the universe. It's a small plaza, not far from the arch, where groups gather on Sundays to listen to people expound on whatever subject that want. This goes all the way back to the 1870s, when populous unrest led to a law that permitted public speeches and debate in that part of the park. The day I was there I witnessed several different impromptu assemblies, listening to speakers raging on in several different languages about who-knows-what. One of the gatherings started to become a bit more agitated that what I felt comfortable with, and as I backed away slowly I bumped against the metal step stool that Mr. Allen was setting up to use as a dais.

Tony Allen at Speakers' Corner in London

He is actually a notable British comedian and writer who has scripted several radio plays, appeared in television shows, written books, and done lots of stand-up comedy, including a stint

as resident comedian in the early days of The Comedy Store in London. Nowadays he is the Artistic Director of the New Agenda Arts Trust and I learned that almost every Sunday he comes to Speakers' Corner.

Tony Allen is very entertaining when he's in full rant mode, and that seemed to be most of the time. His main target when I was there was the Royal Parks Agency, which has recently made some changes which have reduced the overall size of the Speaker's Corner, allowed commercial events to make use of the plaza, and most egregious of all, closed all the toilet facilities at Marble Arch. What he does at Speakers' Corner is performance art and it's very interactive, complete with hecklers which he seems to encourage.

I did manage to see more of the park than just Speakers' Corner, but the place is so big that I was able to only explore a very small part of it. I got as far as the Italian Gardens, an ornamental water garden on the north side of the park which came into existence in the 1860s as a gift to Queen Victoria from her consort Prince Albert. It's a serene place with fountains and statues. And also swans. Many, many mute swans which, along with other waterfowl, nest on the banks of The Long Water, an elongated lake which begins at the Italian Gardens and bisects the park.

the Italian Gardens

statue of Peter Pan in Hyde Park

There are many statues in Hyde Park, ranging in style from the one in the Italian Gardens in honor of smallpox vaccine developer Edward Jenner, to the huge and outlandish gargoyle demon dog near Marble Arch. A walk through the park brings you past many of them, sometimes in unexpected places. The one I found was of a boy who wouldn't grow up.

I was trying in vain to set up a good photo of the ducks and swans along The Long Water when I happened across a statue of Peter Pan. Turns out that it was commissioned by his creator, J.M. Barrie, who lived near the Kensington Gardens section of the park and used that part of the park as an inspiration for his 1906 novel, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*.

There's much more to see in the park than what I had time for and I'm reasonably sure I'll be back someday. There's still a lot more left for me to discover. ☼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