



OCTOBER 3, 2017 BY JOSEPH EASTBURN

The Night He Went Crazy Onstage

When all this started—this was my first memory of Jim: the director and actors were all assembled, sitting around a table in the main room of Graham Memorial Hall—off a quad called McCorkle **Place** on the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The big, airy room was where classes, auditions for the main stage, and sometimes actual productions, took **place**. It was nighttime. We were gathered for the first read-through of that very American play, *The Time of Your Life* by William Saroyan, which won the 1939 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and told the **story** of Joe, an everyman “loafer with money and a good heart,” as Saroyan called him, who sits around at Nick’s, a dive bar in San Francisco, engaging in philosophical discussions with a parade of ne’er-do-wells and typical American losers: a prostitute, a hooper, a gamer (in 1939 it was marbles), an Arab who plays the harmonica, a pair of lovers, a heel; also sailors, drunkards, newsboys, an Indian fighter, a black kid who plays a melancholy piano, an unhappy woman of quality and great beauty—you get the idea.

It was 1976, the centennial of the United States, and yet the Drama Department had hired a British director. Jim was keenly aware of this and later expressed his resentment about it. I was cast as McCarthy, a talkative, well-read longshoreman who has two scenes with Krupp, a uniformed waterfront policeman. Jim was cast as Krupp.

During the read-through we came to our first **scene**, and Jim was asleep, head down on his forearms on top of his jacket. I was sitting across the table from him but someone nudged him. Jim roused himself from under a tartan cap, blinked, opened his script, and began to read. He wasn’t embarrassed; in fact, he seemed to be smiling. I realized later this was a feint of bravery against the forces of darkness taking **place** inside of him.

We began rehearsing the play in that small jewel, Playmaker’s Theatre, a Greek Revival structure with Corinthian columns in the center of UNC’s shady old campus. During rehearsals, I remember only a few moments—first, the director, named Harry, was rehearsing us for our **scene** in which my **character**, McCarthy, turns around at the bar to address Krupp, Jim’s **character**, and the director stopped me and asked why I was turning my **body** that way. I said, “This is the way a big man turns.” Harry said, “But you are a big man.” Which was true. At the time I was 6’3”, probably 215 pounds, but I was contorting my **body** to indicate that I was much larger than I was. I remember Jim laughing but saying nothing. I wanted to argue with Harry but Jim’s laugh was **persuasive**. He was a good actor, and I respected his choices. I stopped contorting.

Another memory: Bonnie, who played a streetwalker, began to pal around with Jim and me. One afternoon, lolling on the grass beside the theatre, we acknowledged what was happening with a group hug, voicing some platitude about teamwork when actually the sexual subtext and Jim’s and my rivalry for Bonnie’s affections (and her delight in that) was really what was on our minds. We only laughed, the carefree laughs of twenty-year-olds doing theatre in the 1970s, which, looking back now, was certainly a time of innocence. It was the year Jimmy Carter was elected President.

When the play had first opened, many of my friends who came to see it said the play was tedious. Nothing was happening, they said. It really was a play about people talking in a bar, that’s it—a slice of life from another anachronistic era, a “talky” enterprise with no drama but a nice set. All that changed the night Jim went crazy.

The cast had settled into the run. There was nothing like live performance to help you hone your **character**, search for onstage moments in a **scene**, maybe try to get the ensemble to be more cohesive or get a laugh. During that period I was living with a roommate in an apartment not up on the hill but down in the flats across the 15-501. One night after a cast party, I ended up sleeping on the floor of Jim’s rented room on the second floor of a professor’s house on McCauley Street, right next to the university. During the night, I opened an eye to see Jim get up in the darkness to go to the bathroom down the hall. He was naked and, I thought, the guy’s in good shape.

I didn’t notice anything unusual about Jim’s behavior during this period. He would show up backstage as Krupp, in his police uniform with nightstick and handcuffs attached to his belt. At

times, he seemed a little down, that's all; everything was copacetic. Then, one night, he showed up fifteen minutes before our entrance, dressed in a white suit and shades, with a stack of record albums under his arm. When I left the dressing room and climbed the stairs to the backstage area, the actor playing Nick, who stood behind the onstage bar (and whose name was Mark), took me aside. He said something was the matter with Jim. I peered at Jim's get-up across the dimly lit backstage area, not understanding what I was seeing. Mark told me that when Jim had shown up, Mark had asked him what was going on. Jim had said that he just wanted "to party." Mark had replied, "Hey, man, that's what I'm tryin' to do..."

But Jim was determined to go out onstage.

A few minutes before we were about to make our entrance, I walked up to Jim and asked if he was all right. He nodded and smiled, looking a little embarrassed, showing me he was frightened. That made two of us. The stage manager cued us, and we came out onstage and walked down a long staircase. The **scene** called for us to belly up to the bar, order drinks, and grab bar stools—while Krupp and McCarthy would greet the **main character**, Joe, and launch into a philosophical discussion about American workers, particularly on the waterfront. McCarthy did most of the talking, but as written, Krupp disagreed, asked questions, or argued back.

As Jim entered in a white suit with shades, all the other actors already onstage froze. They had no idea what was going on but knew something was terribly wrong. Jim wandered around the stage, mumbling unintelligible words to himself. His non-sequiturs were sarcastic. Or he would just laugh. It was eerie. Remember, this was during a live performance.

I started our **scene** but when Krupp's line back to me was not forthcoming, I turned his line into a question and asked myself the question he would have asked, but like a **rhetorical**, as in, "You want to know why I do...such and such? Well, I do it because of...x,y,z."

And I just kept talking, trying to play both parts of the **scene** as a monologue while Jim wandered the stage. At one point, with a cigarette between his lips, Jim walked up and asked me for a light. I remember lighting his cigarette but still talking, trying to keep the ball in the air. The match went out before it could light him, and I had to strike another match. Luckily, I could keep talking because my **character**, McCarthy, is such a blowhard. Here's an exchange to give you an idea. In a way you can't blame Jim for cracking up—having to listen to this guy every night. It starts with a long monologue but the middle portion has been mercifully cut out:

McCarthy: I'm a longshoreman. And an idealist. I'm a man with too much brawn to be an intellectual, exclusively. (cut) I haven't the heart to be a heel, so I'm a worker. I've got a son in high school who's already thinking of being a writer.

Krupp: I wanted to be a writer once.

Joe: Wonderful. (He puts down the paper, looks at Krupp and McCarthy.)

McCarthy: They all wanted to be writers. Every maniac in the world that ever brought about the murder of people through war started out in an attic or a basement writing **poetry**. It stank. So they got even by becoming important heels. And it's still going on.

Krupp: Is it really, Joe?

Joe: Look at today's paper.

McCarthy: Right now on Telegraph Hill is some punk who is trying to be Shakespeare. Ten years from now he'll be a senator. Or a communist.

Krupp: Somebody ought to do something about it.

There was a particular word in that exchange that, in rehearsal, I used to trip over. Instead of saying

“communist,” I had to stop myself from saying another word (which rhymed) and which I think was “columnist.” When I got to that line on this night, I was so frazzled, I said, “...Ten years from now he’ll be a senator. Or a columnist.” Jim immediately wheeled and laughed darkly at my mistake.

Finally, I got to a point where I had lost my **place** and couldn’t remember where we were in the **scene**. I felt myself go silent, looking down, defeated, because I knew that from here on, there might be uninterrupted silence. It was a moment of terror. I had forgotten about a later part of the **scene** where a minor **character** in the bar, who had called his girlfriend earlier, was anxiously waiting for her to call back. The stage manager rang the onstage pay-phone. The actor bolted for the phone, and the **scene** came back to life. That got us to the next part of the **scene**, which leads to the end of the **scene**, where a hooper begins to dance for everybody before we exit. When the hooper finished his dance, I somehow got Jim up the stairs to the exit doors. He stopped and made a disparaging remark about the dance, and I remember pointing to Brian, the actor playing the hooper, and saying, “He was good.”

Somehow we got off stage and found ourselves standing in the darkness of the backstage area. We walked to the back wall of the theatre, where the backstage doors were swung wide open to cool things off. Jim smiled at me like we’d gotten away with something. I was angry and don’t remember what I said, but was arguing with him as we jumped out the back doors. Jim started walking purposefully. I walked alongside him, trying to find out what was going on. I knew we had a little time; there were some scenes before intermission and, after that, an act before Jim had to come back onstage for his **scene** in Act IV.

As we walked across campus in the dark, Jim touched on his anger about the Drama Department hiring a British director. But there were other things he was more upset about. A barrage of resentments and disappointments poured out of him. We ended up in a parking lot behind the house where he lived on McCauley Street, standing beside his car. The driver’s door was open, and I insisted that he needed to come back and do Act IV.

He said, “I’m doing Act IV now.” With that he got in his car and drove toward the Virginia state line. I heard a few days later that he had been found, alone and disoriented, inside Kerr Lake Recreation Area, a park not far from his family home.

I rushed back to the theatre. With the cast standing around in the green room, I told them the **story** of Jim’s and my conversation. One actor, Michael (who played the lovesick boyfriend), kept saying inconsolably, “I was watching the death of an actor.” Brian, the actor who played the hooper, read from a Post-it that he had scribbled on during the onstage **scene**. In front of the cast, he read, “What a noble effort.” I declined to take credit but secretly was pleased by the acknowledgement. Then Brian said, “I misspelled noble.”

The actors figured out a way to bypass Jim’s Act IV **scene**. Later that night, after the show, the director brought a six-pack over to the house on McCauley Street, where we talked about what had happened with other cast members and with Foster, the professor who was renting Jim the room. Harry wanted to make amends for something, but it clearly had nothing to do with him. The part of Krupp was recast.

After the show had closed, I drove up one weekend to Kerr Lake to visit Jim. He had been hospitalized and put on medication. I met his father and mother, had a **tense** dinner with them; it seemed they were still not used to what was happening to their son. Afterward, I spent the evening talking with Jim into the wee hours. Something about the darkness of Jim’s mental state scared me. At one point, unable to take any more intense conversation, I fell asleep on the basement rug, where I was to spend the night. I was startled out of a fitful sleep, and when I opened my eyes, Jim was standing over me.

I jumped to my feet. Jim started talking about the Atomic Clock, a clock that uses a frequency of the electromagnetic spectrum of atoms as its timekeeping element. He was arguing, with great conviction that time didn’t exist, and we are, all of us, completely and totally alone and unmoored in

time. The fire in his eyes, the obsessive certitude of his belief, was unnerving. He was freaking me out. I remember the next morning driving back to Chapel Hill feeling disoriented, not sure if I really ever wanted to see Jim again.

Sometime later, my roommate and I had a falling out (which was my fault), and I needed a new **place** to live. I walked over to the McCauley Street house one day and knocked on the front door. Foster, the professor, came out onto the porch. He was an older man from whom I'd taken a movement class years before, and I respected him. I asked if I could rent Jim's room. He said that would be fine. I ended up moving into that upstairs room and lived there several years, in fact, until I left Chapel Hill altogether and moved to New York City to pursue an acting career.

One day, Jim's father appeared, knocked on the door of the upstairs room, and came in to talk. He couldn't seem to settle, nervously pacing the room, inhabited by a nervous energy. Clearly, he was tormented about his son's illness. He said he wanted to talk to someone who understood. I really didn't know what to say to him. He was making me uncomfortable. When he left, I hoped he would not come back. It was as if I thought keeping Jim and his father away would inoculate me against my own darkness. But I was wrong.

During this time, I was having a crisis where money was concerned, as most actors or writers inevitably do; I was also writing **poetry** at the time. My father, a former talented writer, director, and opera singer in his own right, was living a half-hour away in the city of Raleigh after having gotten a divorce from my mother. He'd remarried and moved back to the **place** where he had been raised from age nine—in fact, the same neighborhood, which was now called North Hills. He worked as an insurance agent for the John Hancock Life Insurance Company, was good at it (he had the gift of gab), and somehow talked me into entering their agent-training program. I didn't want to do this but admitted my earning power looked bleak, so I made a good-faith effort to buy a suit and try to look like a professional. I went through the motions of being a salesman, but my heart wasn't in it. When I would show up at my girlfriend's house in Carrboro in my suit and tie, telling her about my plans to sell insurance, she would say, "Joe, this just sounds gross."

I agonized about this decision. I didn't want to disappoint my father, but mostly I didn't think I could do the job. To a 26-year-old, the whole idea of sales, of trying to talk people into buying a policy on their life, seemed incredibly morbid to me. I remember having the sensation that, if I was going to be a salesman, I could not look at trees; I had to keep my eyes down. North Carolina is very green, and the trees are an amazing feature of the landscape. I was forever walking around the sidewalks of Chapel Hill and Carrboro looking up at the trees, letting them fill me with their beauty, allowing their energy to relax me and release me from the swarm of my **thoughts**. Their leaves and the way the branches swayed in the wind seemed the closest thing I had to a spiritual experience. But I told myself that as long as I was an insurance agent, I couldn't look at trees. Why I made this decision still baffles me. Was it an attempt to close the vulnerable side of my nature off? Did I **reason** that this part of me was an impediment to being a businessman? I had no idea.

Finally I heard Jim was back at school and was playing Virgil in the department's production of the William Inge play *Bus Stop*. The show was being staged in that same room in Graham Memorial Hall where our first read-through was. During this period, my insurance agent training was progressing, and I was about to apply for my license but was still anguished about it. It seemed that I was leaving the theatre and arts world I loved to join the straight world of boring businesspeople.

I went to see Jim in the play. He was stunning. To see his bravery in the part moved me very deeply. Virgil is the **character** who is best friends with the male lead, Bo, and he tries to educate him in the ways of women and the civilized world outside of their life on a ranch. There's a moment at the end of the play, after Bo has gone off with Cherie to his Montana ranch to live happily ever after, and Virgil lets him go. Grace—the owner of the diner where the play takes **place**—notices Virgil as she's turning off the lights and says, "I'm sorry, Mister, but you're just left out in the cold." They dimmed the house lights so that Jim was just a silhouette onstage. As he stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray at the counter, he said, mainly to himself, "Well...that's what happens to some people."

Blackout.

The moment captured Jim's brave journey back from a mental breakdown. I was proud of him and went backstage to tell him so. I stayed up most of the night thinking about Jim's performance and whether or not I should become an insurance agent. In the morning I called the head of the agent-training program and my father and told them both I could not sell insurance. They both said okay and wished me well. The first thing I saw—when I put the phone down and stood up from my desk to look out the window—were the trees.

Joseph Eastburn

I lived fourteen years in New York City, where my parents met onstage at the Cherry Lane Theatre in 1941. Working as an actor/singer, I appeared in over thirty productions. At the Williamstown Theatre Festival, two of my plays were workshopped—one, Heart's Desire, featured the Tony Award-winning actors Patricia Elliott, George Grizzard, and Donna Murphy. In Los Angeles, I directed a staged reading of my play Candor at the Coronet Theatre with Wendy Malick and Dan Lauria. Living in California, I ride my bike, drive a beautiful old wreck of a sports car, and still read The New Yorker.

I graduated from the Metropolitan campus of SUNY at Empire State College and earned a master's degree from USC, where I taught writing for ten years. My writing has appeared in Apalachee Review, Crack the Spine, and The Sun Magazine.

📁 ESSAYS

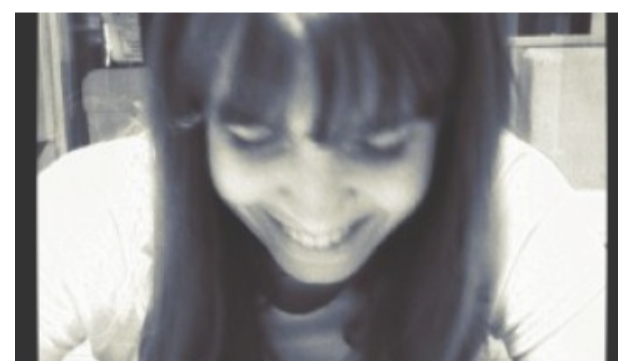
JOSEPH EASTBURN, NONFICTION, THE NIGHT HE WENT CRAZY ONSTAGE



Are You Almost
July 15, 2013
In "Fiction"



Birthday Party
June 15, 2015
In "Fiction"



Jason Duffy Eats Your Friends
January 19, 2015
In "Fiction"