
AT ISSUE

Goodnight, Delight

Lo these many years later, the question has lost none of its power to stun: If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be? We never expected Barbara Walters to give Socrates a run for his money, but *this*? In retrospect, the question probably signaled a defining moment in the devolution of the TV interview. And yet its empty-headedness is rather appealing today, when we routinely expect our interviewers to follow the baton right to the knee, the knife to its target flesh. The cocktail of choice for Barbara and her media compatriots is now a mix of six parts prurience and some shavings of concern.

Let's try to recapture the innocence and imagine the arboreal-preference question put not to some hapless celebrity but to the national public mood today. What might the mood answer? Not oak or pine or redwood, surely; nothing so sturdy or heroic. A lemon tree, maybe—and if not the entire tree, then its workaday fruit, which might roll to the corner of the produce department and lie unnoticed for days, sour and yellow and softening. Not unlike the times. We live in a lemon of an age, and if it came with a warranty, we'd be entitled to a refund.

Then again, who has ever thought the times, any times, were *not* out of joint? "Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart," said Hamlet, even before receiving his fatal wound. Hamlet's heart had every reason to weigh a ton, but what is our excuse for the heaviness we have wrapped ourselves in like a stadium blanket? The popular culture is starved for wit and lightness and easy ingenuity, and the society is full of groups determined to jump till every soufflé falls.

We are losing our capacity for delight. Delight is not so explosive as joy, nor as deep-seated and sustained as happiness, even hap-

piness that is short-lived. It is more modest than either, pleasure of a softer kind, a whisper rather than a shout. Sure, it still exists in pockets here and there, as partisans endure in caves for a while under continual siege after they have lost the war. But delight rarely shows its face, for fear of being picked off.

You have only to say the word, nimble and airborne, to feel its attraction. In these earth-bound times, the volume of just about everything is too high to hear delight's soft voice. It's not in-your-face, and these are in-your-face years. The Democrats caught the mood perfectly in the 1992 war-room cry of which they were so proud—"It's the economy, stupid!" Like the professionals who had contrived it,

much of the country found the sentence amusing—this is the way we talk to one another—when it was merely demeaning.

Places where delight was once common—the theater, movies, popular music, art museums, the classroom, bed—are as stripped of it as public figures are of their privacy. Take sex. If you believe the hype, it will either kill or incriminate. How far can I go, at what speed, and in what order? Nothing is easy. In the classroom, you must watch what you say. In art museums, you must watch where you step.

Or take music. The tune is out and aggression is in; album notes thank not God but parole officers. On TV the true stories of rampant victimization—of wives beaten up and kids beaten down—leave you hungry less for justice than for potato chips. Shakespeare had Holinshed; TV has the tabloids that block your escape from the supermarket.

In the theater, those foreign megamusicals have been let onto the stage like so many Trojan horses, mechanical and dead—no, worse than dead, deadly—horse and horse by-prod-

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uct too. Thoughts too shallow for greeting cards find their just expression in these shows. Full of calculation but devoid of wit, they are said to give pleasure around the world. The only pleasure is to be counted among those who have survived them.

Delight was once routine in the theater; it lodged in the smallest details. The case can be made even with frivolous evidence. For example, in a failed Sheldon Harnick-Jerry Bock musical comedy called *Tenderloin* (1960), a mock 19th-century ballad told of a young urban orphan named Annie who supported herself making artificial flowers out of paper and wire and wax. Her career ended when her fingers froze and, as the lyrics have it, "wiring and waxing, she waned." It's not Pope, not even Porter or Hart, but there is more wit in that one half-line, sly and offhand—delightful, really—than in all the outbursts of A. L. Webber and his imitators, with their gassy sewers and wobbly helicopters and traveling chandeliers. Big loud stuff, right in your face, avoiding the heart and the brain. But the public is not inclined to hear the difference or judge the loss. And so, waxing, we have waned too.

Why the leaden hand upon us? We are not at war, abroad at least, or in economic depression at home. We are not sending children under their desks in school to practice surviving nuclear attack. (They have only to survive their friends.) We are not ravaged by disease, as parts of the world plainly are. We are living longer than ever, yet we can't shake the feeling that, after the years of health-club dues and little salt and less fat and enough leafy greens to carpet a continent, death is a defeat, even at 82.

Some days we are told that the country is headed for bankruptcy and that our children, or maybe their children, will pay for our excesses. Yet most of us do not live lives of excess, but merely ordinary lives. It's just that we fail to notice how extraordinarily high our ordinary expectations have become—expectations for how we should be able to dress, to play, to travel, and to surround ourselves with

material goods that explain who we are. We have been assured that we are entitled and have rights, not just to pursue happiness but to sit triumphant astride its lassoed and domesticated hide. Falling short of what we have been led to expect, we are disappointed and act bereft of everything. We require Dr. Chekhov, and only Dr. Peter Kramer is on call.

Those of us too young to have known firsthand are told heroic myths of America in the 1930s, when times were genuinely bad, and people struggled against shortage and loss and hopelessness. At this remove, it is hard to figure how they did it, for we seem less capable today of coping with adversity, for all our opportunities to practice—natural disasters, casual violence, imperiled careers. The impulse to surrender, or to look elsewhere for rescue, is powerful, and the larger culture reflects the stress of a center barely holding.

Yet, oddly, in the midst of all the gloom and incentives to despair in the '30s, a capacity for delight seems to have persisted and to have been given full rein. Consider only the evidence that survives on screen. This was the great age of screwball comedy and of a certain kind of musical that brought the impossible within easy reach and nourished dreams and aspiration. Happy endings were the rule, against all probability. (Now, of course, we know these people were just fooling themselves.)

Perhaps the most gravely beautiful dance Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers ever performed occurs in the otherwise frivolous 1936 film *Follow the Fleet*. Gamblers down on their luck and close to despair, the two meet on an absurdly elegant casino rooftop, where each has come to commit suicide. They look like a million and are worth not a buck. Out of their individual gloom, to Irving Berlin's "Let's Face the Music and Dance," they create ravishing romantic images (Ginger in a sexy dress that moves with a will of its own), and they leave together as lovers, arm in arm. Just before they exit the stage, when the dance seems done,

there is a moment so surprising and audacious that it stirs the purest delight. The pair sink side by side to one knee, rise slowly, move backward, then forward several paces; suddenly they arch their backs, lift one knee high and triumphant, and lunge into the wings, the dark, the future.

Were Depression audiences buoyed by this allegory of the national mood, by Berlin's exhortation to stare down adversity and make the most of chance opportunity? It's hard to think how they could not have been. Our dances look like aerobic exercises—all work, none of Ginger's airy gauze, lots of Day-Glo spandex, respiration not aspiration. If these dances are about the heart, it's not the heart that dreams and yearns, only the pump that's going to need a by-pass unless adequately primed.

Is it that we now know too much to be taken in by the fantasies? Is that why our dreams have the zircon reality of the Home Shopping Network? Or perhaps we have simply embraced a different set of illusions and fail to see that we are complicit in their persistence. There are no bounds, for example, to the space one may occupy in the society to pro-

claim oneself a victim or to toss the hot coal of responsibility for personal failure into the lap of someone, anyone, else—ancestor, neighbor, bystander, ghost.

Nor are there constraints on the mental gymnastics we have learned to perform to excuse what common sense would once have allowed us to see plain—matricide, for example—in a more naive time, untroubled by sensitivity seminars and speech monitors, by individuals so emotionally fragile they find insult everywhere, by legions of the abused, by “the healing process” raised to the level of Olympic event, by assertions of ubiquitous “community.” (“The bimbo community issued a strongly worded protest today against its continued characterization as soft from top to bottom.” “The pedophilic community will bring a court challenge against its standing exclusion from all Toys ‘R Us stores.”) Pick your aggrieved; pick your grievance; pick a number.

Every savvy Zeitgeist will keep a suitcase handy, for the moment it is sent packing, and many of us are counting the days till our grim ghost gets the boot. Until then, goodnight, delight. Sleep well and keep your beauty. Your time will come round again. We'll wake you when the nonsense is over.

—James Morris