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Festival of Life

by CHARLES L. MEE

I love this café

I mean
for breakfast
or lunch
or dinner
or just a café au lait in the afternoon,
or a glass of Chateauneuf du Pape

I love the Place de l'Horloge
I mean this is like being backstage
at the biggest play in the world

In the Place de l'Horloge you're in the middle
of the café and some plays
and the city and the countryside
all at the same time
and half the people here are actors and dancers
and singers and violinists and drummers
and trumpet players and acrobats
and clowns and people wearing costumes for Moliere plays
and tap dancers with saxophones
and they all perform all the time.

You can sit here in this café
and see 667 plays walk past you

and the other people in the café
are part of the play, too

See that guy over there? That guy!
Is he just a person
drinking coffee?
Or is he a character
in one of these plays?

this is life
this is all of life
this is the perfect life

and plus I'd love to go for a ride over there on the carousel. Would you?

No?
You think the carousel is not for grownups?
Is that what you really think?
Does that mean life is not for grownups?

I'd like to get out of town, too,
but the truth is
I even just love to take a walk along the river
and see the famous bridge.

[singing]

Sur le Pont d'Avignon?
On y danse, on y danse?
Sur le Pont d'Avignon?
On y danse....I forget.

Do you like to walk by the river too?
or just get in the car and take a drive
through the trees
through the vineyards
through the sunflowers
through the countryside
to St. Remy
and that little café on the circle street
that goes around St. Remy

the little café that has a little carousel for kids INSIDE!
And you can sit outside, too,
and see the other people passing by
and you hear them talk
and you think:
they have lives, too.
Your life is not the only life.
There are a lot of lives.

Sitting in a café is all about life
Sitting in a café IS life.

[sip of something here]

and you know that story people talked about
about those guys
in the garden café
at that hotel in Villeneuve
the Prieure Hotel
that used to be a monastery like 500 years ago
you know the one
and it has this restaurant in the back
in the garden
and an herb garden around that garden
and these guys wanted to get Patrice Chereau
to direct a Broadway show they would produce
and they were having a glass of wine with Chereau
in the garden in the afternoon
and they had brought that famous lighting designer
from New York
what's her name?
Jennifer.....Tipton!
Jennifer Tipton,
(who does the most beautiful lighting design
of anyone in the world
gorgeous)

and she didn't ever wear sunglasses in the garden
because she said she wanted to see the world

in all its natural beauty
and it was okay if she eventually got cataracts
from not wearing sunglasses
because she needed to see the colors of the world
the way they really were
and Chereau didn't want to do anything on Broadway
and Jennifer Tipton was just sitting there quietly
at the table in the garden, saying nothing,
and then for no reason
she just said very quietly, to herself,
"oh, that's beautiful"
and so of course
everyone turned right away to see where she was looking
and they saw,
on a table over near the herb garden,
someone had left a half-finished glass of rose wine,
and the late afternoon sunshine was shining
right into the glass of rose
and it was the most beautiful thing any of them
had ever seen.

And this is how it is.
You come here for the festival
and you see all these shows
and you see the Place de l'Horloge
you see the sunflowers on the way to St. Remy
you see the people in the café
and it's the festival of life
it's the most beautiful gorgeous thing ever
and we get to be here.

And then don't you think it's awesome?
You're sitting here in the café
and all these people in lunatic costumes
come wandering into the café
and hand you postcards and pieces of paper
all about the shows they are doing somewhere
and then some of them will do a little act
from their show

a little bit of their show
and if you just sit here long enough
like 500 people do little bits of their shows
so just sitting here seeing the clowns and the carousel
and the bits of 500 shows
it's the greatest show on earth

ok now take something edible from the table
a piece of bread or a sip of something or whatever
hold it in your mouth
close your eyes – really close them!
and choreograph the dance of food with your tongue

I'll hum some accompaniment...

[hums about 40 secs of music]

so that's what we call a dance
and
that's what art is
it's a matter of taste

Do you remember that guy a few years ago
who brought out this wooden box
over there in front of the
what is that?
the municipal building?
that big building where all the performance artists
are doing their thing in front of the building?
that guy brought out this wooden box
and put it down on the ground in front of the building
and threw like 15 or 20 wine bottles into it
threw them so hard they all shattered

and then he stuck his head down into the box
and did a head stand
and he got a guy to stand on his neck
(or the back of his head?)
to shove his head down hard into the box

and you thought wow this is an amazing trick
and then he stood up
and his head and his face were covered with blood
and it wasn't a trick
he didn't have a trick
he just cut himself up all over his head
and so we sit in the cafe and look at him
and we think
oh, this is theatre!!

this is why we came to Avignon

and then there was that clown
who kept pursing his lips
every time a woman would be walking near him
passing him by
he would purse his lips
and point to his cheek
and purse his lips
and point to his cheek
until finally she would feel sympathy for him
or think she didn't have a sense of humor
if she didn't play along with him
so she would purse her lips
and lean forward to kiss him on the cheek
and he would turn his head suddenly
and kiss her right on the lips!

And then there was that time
over in front of the Palais des Papes
when that solo dancer in a red dress came out
and these musicians started playing
and a guy came out
and another guy in a suit
and people were coming in from every direction
—all sorts of people,
a construction worker, a pole dancer, a secretary
and I'm thinking
is this the real world of daily life

or is this an act
(or is this some people who got lost
and can't find their way where they're going)
and the music is wild
and all 10 or 12 of the people
are making the same gesture together,
scattered all over everywhere
but dancing the same gestures and moves
and then
silence
and a solo talker starts talking
and then she takes a cell phone call
and I'm wondering
is her lover breaking up with her?
and all the others sing a song
as though that's their response to the sad cell phone call
all 12 people on cell phones at the same time
having the same conversation
about a love affair
a breakup
each taking different lines of the same conversation
or of archtypical conversations around this event
archetypal lines
then music
and they all sing

and then
after I paid the check
and walked over toward the Rue du Four
there was this live video cameraman
and a girl was auditioning for a TV show
and then everyone was auditioning for a reality tv show
someone walked on a beam
while a couple kept falling down a set of steps
like rag dolls
a blonde sang a nasty duet with a guy
and a guy was drumming on an upside down water jug
and there's no a-b-c narrative in any of these productions
there's no 19th century law of cause and effect

sometimes shit happens
often shit happens

and usually it comes as a shock to me,
a revelation
a whole orchestra comes out
but they don't really play these instruments
and yet they can make amazing sounds with them
ending with a Big Noise
and then a guy comes out of it with a guitar solo
and then talk about how bugs have sex
a lottery ball is used as a percussion instrument

a woman puts a soft cello case over her back
so she looks like a cockroach
and does a cockroach dance on the floor
everyone sits in a semi circle singing
and making music with their instruments
finally one woman's harsh almost screaming singing
dominates the room
and people leave one by one
the last guy tries to stop her
and she kicks the shit out of him
gets him down on the ground
pounding and kicking him
while she finishes the song

a 25 year old gay guy sits and solos about his lesbian mother
and we are meant to understand
now there are new ideas of family, new relationships
and all the while the rest of the cast is behind a glass wall
moving in slow motion like fish in a fish bowl
so we are meant to understand even still,
and despite the explanation we are hearing,
we don't understand the infinite possibilities
of human behavior,
human nature

And it turns out that this and that

and that and this
they're just all part of the same life in Avignon
whether you're sitting in the café
or going to see a show
or walking down the street
or having a nap
and, meanwhile,
there is this man and woman at a table
eating rice cakes and spitting them out
as they sing

And it was right after that
that I drove down to St. Remy
and went on down a little further
to the hospital where Van Gogh spent his last year
and he wrote this letter
to his brother
where he said
"Here are the colors I need to have you send me now:
large tubes
3 emerald
2 green
2 cobalt
1 ultramarine
1 orange lead
6 zinc white"
And you think
But!!!
where is the yellow for the sunflowers????
And the thing is
you think he was mad that last year of his life
but he painted a painting like every two and a half days

And so you're driving through Provence thinking about
Van Gogh and sunflowers
and people spitting out rice cakes
and clowns getting women to kiss them on the lips
and having another glass of Chateauneuf de Pape
in the Place de l'Horloge

and all of this together is the life you love
more than any other life on earth

And the cicadas

I love the cicadas
Do you hear them?

There was a time long ago, in prehistoric times
when cicadas were human beings
back before the Muses were born.
And then when the Muses were born
and song came into being
some of these human creatures were so taken by the pleasure of it
that they sang and sang and sang.
And they forgot to eat or drink
they just sang and sang
and so,
before they knew it,
they died.
And from those human creatures a new species came into being
the cicadas
and they were given this special gift from the Muses:
that from the time they are born
they need no nourishment
they just sing continuously
caught forever in the pleasure of the moment
without eating or drinking
until they die.

And then you think
when you drive through the trees down toward Aix
you remember
Napoleon had those trees planted
so his soldiers could walk in the shade

And then
when you think of Napoleon
you think

a lot of these directors in the festival
when they can't think of anything else to do
they resort to violence of all kinds
men and women fighting
screaming
shoving
is it puerile?
or is it basic, fundamental, the foundation of drama
and all an audience wants
like the ancient coliseum in Arles
where gladiators fought to the death
and that was enough entertainment for everyone
no one needed dialogue
or complicated plots

omigod
It seems not so long ago that the Roman empire was here on earth
omigod
and the French Empire
omigod
and the American Empire
and you think how
when you go to Delphi in Greece
and you go to the top of the hill
first you see the ruins of the old houses
and above those you see the ruins of the old government buildings
and above that you see the ruins of the temples
and above that you see the ruins of the Oracle at Delphi
and above that
above everything
you see the ruins of the theatre—
I mean, until Delphi sank into degeneration
and then above everything else was the athletic stadium—
but in the great days
above everything was the theatre
where people would go from their homes
and see the actors on the stage
and behind the stage, behind the actors
they would see their own homes

and their own city
and down in the valley the vineyards and olive trees where they worked
and they would watch Agamemnon on stage
and think
could we do better than that?

and then you remember
that Aristotle said human beings are social animals
we become who we are in our relationships with others
and the art form above all of human relationships is theatre

and that's why we think when we're in Arles
omigod
we need to get back to Avignon
to see that show again where
the lead actress is attacked with
cotton candy, and mustard, and cake

and a woman in a full-length black dress
with a living room floor lamp
walks around with the lamp,
not knowing what to do
so she finally puts the lamp down and does a solo dance
while a guy sings a love song into a mike
while he wears a roller blade on one foot
and he goes in circles
and another guy rolls around with yellow high heeled shoes on his hands
and a man and a woman, both in black underwear, do a dance
behind a glass wall
and she takes off her top

and then the music turns into deafening hard rock
and the dancers hit themselves in the head
with stuffed animals
and you are sitting there thinking
and this is civilization???

and then the whole stage floor is paper
on which the dancers draw with pencils

and blood red and black ink with a sponge
so in the end you have a raked stage floor that looks like
an Arshile Gorky
the red and black ink runs down the rake into the gutter
a woman lifts her dress up above her head
hiding her upper body entirely
exposing herself from the waist down
and takes a long, slow exit
so, alone, covered with red and black ink—
after a pervasive feeling of tragedy has overcome everyone
spattered with blood and dirt
looking wrecked
and then a couple dances
really tenderly
to a heartbreaking piano solo
while 2 women bathe in a pond
with their backs to the audience
like Rembrandt's Bathsheba
and a third woman dances like a fish out of water
the women wear white underwear
and no one is going to hide it

so far, in every piece, the women have shown their underwear
and the men have shown their underwear once
this could be called The Festival of Underpants

and then the couple returns
for another partner dance
not a romantic dance this time
but rather now they are mature partners with a history

you notice one woman is crying
pairs run around and around in circles
with arms outstretched, smiling happily

no warm up
no cool down
no transition
no motivation
no motivated entrances and exits
just:
life happens
you get suddenness this way
and surprise
and miraculousness
An amazing life

STEPHEN'S SONG

Si tu veux me trouver
Cherche-moi au sacré palais
Cherche les boutiques,
 p'tite et mignonnes
Cherche-moi sur Avignon

Cherche-moi dans le beau jardin
Ou on regarde la vue sans fin
Ou l'air est plein d'accordion
Cherche-moi sur Avignon

Sur Avignon tu me trouveras
En buvant du Gigondas

Si tu veux me trouver
Cherche-moi sous le soleil
Les comédiennes font leurs grand sons
Cherche-moi sur Avignon

Cherche-moi ou les gens sont nus
Lorse qu'ils se promenade dans les rues
Lorse qu'ils se battent avec les faux gascons
Cherche-moi sur Avignon

Sur Avignon tu me trouvera
Avec un bonhomme dans mes bras

Si tu me trouverais
Je serai dans les cafés
Avec tout ces comediens de cons
Trouve-moi sur Avignon.

Omigod!
Look what time it is!?!?!?
I'm going to miss my show.
And you might miss your show!
Or maybe you're not going to a show...
Maybe you're just going to take a ride
in the country
Or walk around the streets a little more...
The show, the ride, the streets,
the café, the Place de l'Horloge
it's all life
it's all the same life all together.

Do you know where you're going?
Do you care where you're going?
Let's both just go!
Let's both just jump into it!
We'll see!
OK!
We'll see.

OK I'm going!
I'm going.
Are you coming or are you staying here in the café
in the Place de l'Horloge.
We know what this is.

This is
heaven on earth.

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