

THE OASIS OF INSANITY

THE STUDY & PURSUIT OF ACTING
AT THE BEVERLY HILLS PLAYHOUSE

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AT THE BEVERLY HILLS PLAYHOUSE

BY ALLEN BARTON

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Portions of this book are a memoir recounting events to the best of the author's recollection and the conversations recounted herein are not intended to be word-for-word transcripts. In order maintain privacy or anonymity some names of people and places may have been changed.

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For my family: Tiffany, Zoe, Reed and Henry

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Preface

The Oasis of Insanity is presented in two parts: **Learning** and **Teaching**. Its world is that of the Beverly Hills Playhouse, one of the most renowned acting schools in Los Angeles. The BHP has been a training ground for thousands of actors over 40+ years, many of whom went on to make their indelible mark on “The Industry,” and its current students continue in that tradition day in and day out. The BHP was founded and led for many of those 40+ years by Milton Katselas, a teacher of significant reputation and outsized personality. Milton was my mentor. Three months out of college, I tripped and fell into his school at the recommendation of a pretty girl, and eighteen years later I became its owner and principal teacher. The story of how that happened, of my apprenticeship with the mercurial and inspirational Katselas, comprises the first, **Learning** section. It’s a rip-roaring good story, and while Katselas had many intense, close relationships with students and staff over years that predated my arrival, none was with the guy who ended up making it to the finish line to take over for him. None was with someone who worked as many different jobs from the bottom to the top of the organization, who also happens to be a writer, and so I’m thinking mine is as good a story to tell about him as any.

In becoming a teacher in my own right, ultimately tasked with carrying forward his legacy, I determined early on after his death that the BHP could not simply be a museum for Milton Katselas. The BHP headquarters on Robertson Blvd. in Beverly Hills was ill-suited to the role of mausoleum. The BHP is not inanimate. It’s a living, breathing entity, active sixteen hours a day on most days, and like anything that is alive, it would inevitably need to evolve: new blood, new teachers, new ideas, a fresh, ongoing perspective on the ever-evolving world of the aspiring and professional actor

in Los Angeles and elsewhere. That new perspective should honor Milton and his technique, and honor the unique culture of the BHP as he formed it, but should also be forward-looking and unconstrained by rigidity, dogma, or excessive nostalgia. Milton, the proud Greek-American, would often say himself that he wished Greece would blow up the Parthenon as a symbolic act of shedding what he considered a slavish devotion to its past. That is the spirit behind the essays of the **Teaching** section.

Taken as a whole, I hope *The Oasis of Insanity* charts an entertaining and informative atlas of the world of the actor, but not simply through the narrow, esoteric canyons of acting technique. I hope it presents the broader horizons of a journey taken by a young actor, director and writer under the guidance of Milton's unique mentorship, a journey through the often crazy world of Milton's Beverly Hills Playhouse, whereby the student became a teacher, the lessons learned became the lessons taught, Milton's BHP became my BHP. I hope it's an account both personal and practical, addressed not only to current and former BHP students, but to actors of all stripes, and as well to those who merely wish to understand better the actor's trip and the art of acting.

For the first "memoir" section of this book, wherein I describe twenty-odd episodes from my coming of age at the BHP, I have changed the names of a few players in that history. The purpose of this book is not to *dish*, but there were incidents and certain sequences of events that I felt were necessary to cover. Whatever I have included either had a significant impact on my learning process, is important to understanding BHP history, and/or revealed something interesting and vivid about Milton. Others who were at the BHP during the period 1990-2010 may or may not concur with my take on these events—real-life incidents, particularly in as volatile an environment as an acting school run by Milton Katselas, have as many versions as there are witnesses to them. But I don't want to be that memoirist who feels the need to cram laudatory adjectives before every proper name—it feels too often these days that everyone is bending over backwards in a highly self-conscious effort *not to offend*. Meanwhile, there's that great, unapologetic line in the Yasmina Reza play, *Art*: "The older I get, the more offensive I hope to become." I have always loved that line.

The fact is everyone mentioned in this book, Milton most of all, was part of a period of my life that formed who I came to be, and that impact was felt across the spectrum of good and bad feelings, and as I get older I in some way feel thankful for all of it. I'm not harboring grudges (except one—I'm definitely holding one precious grudge). The fact is I'd be happy to sit down to lunch with any of them (except that one guy) to rehash this vivid history, hopefully with the aid of a light alcoholic beverage or six. But at the same time, I remember giving Milton an early writing sample, an idea for a scene, and he called me a couple days later: "It needs some piss, some cum, a few shards of broken glass, a sprinkle of bitter herbs. Then you'll have something." So I've tried my best to balance that early advice with my not wanting readers who are new to this history to adopt any negative viewpoint on past BHP personalities who are currently alive, presumably well, and who have moved on to new and hopefully fulfilling "post-Milton" chapters of their lives.

Introduction

It's Tuesday afternoon, after 4pm. The driveway basketball court is small, using the half of the driveway that lies behind the gate—cars in front, basketball in back. I didn't often get this call. Not that I'm a terrible athlete—I play tennis religiously twice a week, and I'm probably better than could be expected at other sports, given I was never on a team, never played high school or college sports. I remember my freshman year at Harvard, one of my roommates was an Olympic-level competitive oarsman, and rowing crew was one of the few sports you could do at Harvard without ever having done it before. I had a brother-in-law who also rowed crew for Harvard back in his day, and at the Olympics, so I considered it all a “sign”, and penciled my name in on a sheet of paper to row freshman light eights. And I wasn't bad. I got in the best shape of my life doing the “stadiums”—running up the seating section of Harvard Stadium, and then from the top of each section running down the small steps. Ouch. I couldn't walk after those afternoons, but it was still a good feeling. And the early mornings watching the sun rise over the Charles River...They didn't suck. On the posted time/strength tests, my name was solidly middle-of-the-pack, until around November, when everyone below me on that list had already dropped out of the program. I followed shortly thereafter. The Hasty Pudding Theatricals needed a pianist for their small pit orchestra (“the band”), and I was determined to get that job. So, I left the musty confines of Newell Boathouse and rowing crew for the musty confines of the old Hasty Pudding Theatre and playing piano for rehearsals and performances of a famous college drag show. I had done this, playing piano for the school musicals, since I was 14, and watching the rehearsals, quietly, day after day, observing the communication between directors, choreographers, actors and the

tech crew—this served to be the quite unintentional foundation of my later training.

Back to the basketball court. I didn't often get this call, because Milton had a regular crew for his twice-weekly two-on-two half-court basketball games. Michael #1. Michael #2. Mark. Todd. David. Rick. There were plenty of them. If I got the call, it meant a bunch of people had been called and were unavailable, a fact that would very likely make the host more ornery than perhaps even usual.

Milton Katselas was very serious about his 2-on-2 basketball games. They took place Tuesdays and Thursdays at 4:30pm without fail, and often Saturday afternoons after he taught his renowned masterclass in the mornings. The three invited players would show up early, let themselves in through the driveway gate, and start warming up, perhaps with some uneasy banter about the goings on at the Beverly Hills Playhouse, the acting school Milton founded and still oversaw as owner and its legendary teaching presence. You wouldn't want to speak too loudly about any of it, because if Milton came out and heard you, he'd take up whatever topic was at hand and you'd find yourself with a 10-point list of actions to take, not just to handle the situation, but to improve whatever weakness existed within you that was part of why the problem existed in the first place. Better to speak *sotto voce*. If spirits amongst players were high before he showed up, there was always a darker undercurrent that would emerge when Milton made his appearance, exiting the side door from his office onto the court, wearing sweat clothes and saying little, if anything. Chatter would subside and a quiet ritual of warmup shots would unfold for a couple minutes before the game began.

Rule number one: Milton wins. Period. This didn't mean that anyone was expected to throw the game. It was just a fact. Milton wins. It was his court, and he had this absurd hook-shot that he could hit with 90% accuracy from anywhere. And while Milton could be physical in his play, he would also take harsh exception to physical defense against him. So his team would win almost every game, and if there was some disturbance in the space-time continuum and the other team won, it was not something you wanted to celebrate. No high fives. Suppress those smiles. Milton would simply take the ball angrily and start a new game, winning

it 11-2 before returning inside his house after an hour without much further comment.

So here I was, teamed up with Michael #2, against Milton and Michael #1. At some point during the game, I took the ball to start play after a score, with Milton defending me. I saw a bit of space to my left and darted past him, drove to the basket and scored a layup. Silence. I got the ball again to restart play. I passed to Michael #2, he passed back to me and I made the same move to my left. Drove to the basket and scored another layup. Milton took the ball and slammed it to the ground before bouncing it to me for another restart.

Knowing better than to try the same move a third time, I just passed to Michael #2 and walked forward into the court.

“No,” Milton said sharply. “No. You take it out.”

Michael #2 passed the ball back to me, and I stood there not quite knowing what to do. Michael #2 just shrugged the shrug that said, *You’re on your own, man.*

“Try it again,” Milton said.

“What?”

“Try it again. Make that move again.”

I smiled, thinking perhaps he was just joking. Nope.

“Make the move again. Try for the layup. Go ahead.”

I half-heartedly dribbled out and tried to move to my left. Milton threw his body into me, launching me into the side of his house, after which I crumpled to the ground. My left arm was scraped and bleeding from the impact. I looked up, a bit dazed.

“My foul,” he said.

Fast forward. It had been years since Milton was last able to play basketball—complications from a nasty diabetic foot infection brought that chapter to a close. But now, in late October of 2008, the entire world of the Beverly Hills Playhouse was turned upside down, because on a Friday afternoon, Milton passed away at 75 from a heart attack he suffered three days prior. He’d gone to the bedroom of his Alfred St. home to rest, and at some point one of the two guys who were almost always with him to assist, drive, cook, etc. looked in on him and saw something was wrong. It was too late—he had probably been in arrest for 5-10 minutes, and even with the arrival of the paramedics and quick transport to the ER at Cedars-Sinai down the street, he never regained

consciousness, there was no brain activity, nothing. As the ER doc said when I arrived there 90 minutes later, “He’s critical and extremely grave.” They were able to keep him on life support for three days, but it was just a matter of who made the decision, and when. Technically, per his legal documents, I was to make that decision, but I knew I couldn’t make it on my own without his family and his longtime girlfriend (hereafter to be known as “MG”) agreeing as well. That agreement finally came on Friday morning. While waiting for Milton’s brother Tasso to arrive at the hospital, I met with MG and Gary Grossman, Milton’s longtime producer and loyal BHP soldier, in the lobby area of the seventh floor of the Saperstein tower at Cedars. As we spoke of the situation and what was to come that day, we all craned our ears at some weird sound we were picking up. Was the critical care tower now playing *muzak*? Impossible. Gary searched his pockets and found his iPhone, and it was playing “Life is!” from Milton’s favorite musical, *Zorba*. I shit you not. There’s no way that phone could have just “pocket dialed” its way through the many keystrokes necessary to find that song in the library and start playing it. So we took this as a sign that Milton was fucking with us still, somewhat mischievously (he hated technology—never owned his own cell phone or computer), and thus was telling us the decision was the right one, and he was ready.

The palliative care team came in at 3:30pm, and Gary, MG and I stood by Milton while they did their work. It didn’t take long, and that was that. I had been at the BHP eighteen years by that moment, fully sixteen of those were spent in almost daily contact with Milton. And at that moment, I was split by two equal sensations: Fear and Relief. At age 40 I was now the majority owner of the BHP, and responsible for what would happen from that day forward to keep it going, which was going to be a daunting task, more so particularly in the next four years to come than I could even anticipate.

But what was with the relief? At different times of any day over the last few years, this was my mentor, my boss, my friend, and to a certain extent a father figure for me. *Relief*? This was very strange. But I would be willing to bet that those who spent time with him outside his always brilliantly executed teaching, or who worked for him—they might understand it. Some may have felt it themselves. Such was the dichotomy of Milton Katselas.

His teaching talent wasn't to be questioned, and he could be exceedingly charming and generous in his good moods. But this select group will also know well the essential question we all suffered through on a continual basis: *To communicate, or not to communicate? That was the question.* Because if you communicated the wrong thing to him, or at the wrong time, or in the wrong way, he could unleash a Mediterranean temper so horrific that it would suppress any future desire to communicate the right thing at the right time, in the right way, even if you were certain as to what that would be. There is a long line of personal assistants, who, when they reached the end of the road, took off and when I say we never heard from them again, I mean...*Gone.* This select group would know well the adrenaline-surging phone calls, taking place often as early as 7am or late as midnight. You'd be able to tell often in the first three seconds whether it would be a good call or not—his mood would be reflected in his greeting immediately. Good: "Hey, man, what's the latest?" Or, often, yelled at full volume across his art studio in Los Feliz, at his assistant holding the phone, who would then parrot Milton's words to you. Something like this:

MILTON (Screaming in the background, clear as day, mad as hell): Ask him where the fuck are the stats!

ASSISTANT: Milton would like to know where are the stats?

ME: Which stats?

ASSISTANT (back to Milton): He's asking which stats?

MILTON (Screaming): Which fucking stats does he think I'm talking about?

ASSISTANT: Milton is asking which fucking stats do you think he's talking about?

ME: Well, either financial stats or incoming interviews? Could be either. I don't remember him asking for a report.

ASSISTANT: He says it could be either financial or incoming interviews? He doesn't remember you asking for it.

MILTON (Screaming): THE FUCKING STATS. I don't give a shit which stats. I shouldn't have to ask for it. Financial. Interview. I haven't gotten them. They're linked. One is linked to the other. The stats. WHERE ARE THEY?

ASSISTANT: Milton thinks these are all linked, he's just wondering...

MILTON (Screaming): What is he doing today at 2pm?

ASSISTANT: Milton would like to know what you're doing today at 2pm.

ME: My guess is I'm canceling whatever it is to meet with him.

ASSISTANT: His guess is he's meeting with you.

MILTON: DAMNED FUCKING RIGHT HE IS. My house. Tell him to bring the stats. All of them.

ASSISTANT: Did you get that?

ME: Yup.

Click.

I had thousands of calls with Milton, and a lot of them went down like that. And I'll tell you, I write that dialogue, and I don't miss it. Not one word of it. I miss the man sometimes for sure, but I don't miss working for him. I don't miss the phone calls. Back before cell phones came to dominate, I had the landline in my apartment programmed to give a special "RING-RING...RIIINNG" pattern when Milton was calling from his caller-ID blocked house. To this day, the "SOUND-SOUND...SOUNNNND" rhythm surges my adrenaline.

In the weeks following his death, the story about his slamming me up against his house in the basketball game came up. There were a couple of memorial services outside the confines of his theaters—one at Celebrity Centre, which was the Church of Scientology's artist sanctuary on Franklin & Bronson (yes, I will be addressing this topic in a later chapter), and another, larger memorial at the Directors Guild of America. I was to speak at both of them, and I wanted to tell that story, along with another far more positive one about something amazing Milton did for me as I prepped a piano recital years before in 1994. (That story too follows later.) I wanted to show both sides of his personality, the mercurial and the generous, and the basketball story always got a good laugh from anyone who knew him.

However, both MG and Irene Dirmann, his longtime close friend, who had run the BHP for Milton as its iron-willed, Margaret Thatcher-like Executive Director for a dozen years or so until 1995, determined that the basketball story would cast him in a negative light and thus was unsuitable. MG and Irene were really in charge of the message and tone, and somewhat the logistics of these services, and so I acquiesced, telling just the one

“good Milton” story. But it struck me as so classic, so much of what we all needed to move past, and quickly: Protecting him, managing people’s perception of him, soothing him, sucking up to him, trying to win his approval, even posthumously...I told the basketball story privately in the many conversations that took place after his passing, along with the fact that I had been banned from repeating it in public. And while it shouldn’t have been a big deal, I resented that I wasn’t “allowed” to tell the story at the services. I thought, “C’mon, let’s tell the story of this man. The real guy. The good, bad, the ugly and the exceptional.” Part of the idea for this book was born at that moment.

In the years since, I’ve grown to have more confidence in my own convictions, and the voice to proclaim them. I managed somehow to steer the BHP through the turbulent waters of the time after Milton’s death. I tried to honor everything I thought was the bedrock of what made the BHP special as an acting school, namely Milton’s distinctive approach to talking about acting, while also removing the cultural aspects I felt were negative, largely associated with that same guy’s very difficult personality and its impact on that culture. In 2009, I started a blog to express my thoughts on the study and pursuit of acting, which was a huge mental obstacle itself: *How dare anyone in this joint have a thought about acting without it being Milton’s thought?* Such are the trials of studying with a master and then being out on your own.

It was only years later that I finally arrived at the title of “The Oasis of Insanity.” Originally the title came from a class I taught at some point, wherein I was critiquing an actor, and if memory serves, he was bitching and moaning about his career, the doubts, the fears, and all the rest of it—the stuff people in the performing arts deal with practically every day, if not every hour, while imagining there is some “normal” life out there that they are really quite stupid, quite insane, not to have chosen. After a while, I brushed his complaining aside, and said something along these lines: “Listen. I’ve known you a long time. You love this. You love acting. You think it’s insane, and maybe it is, but you love it. And you know damned well you have no place sitting in some florescent-lit office, typing or filing or programming a mobile app. If you did that, you know you would be miserable, and this theatre would become your oasis, instead of the symbol of a bad choice. So let’s look at it that way now, take pride in choosing ‘the

path less traveled by.’ Maybe this is simply where you belong, and it comes with its own doubts and fears, but that place you imagine, the so-called ‘normal life,’ has its own unique doubts and fears. Ultimately the oasis is located where you love what you do. We’re all sitting here in an oasis of insanity.”

It was just an extemporaneous thought, but as soon as I said it, I remember turning to the class, saying, “That’s a pretty good title for a book about this place.” So from when I was a 22-year-old who tripped and fell into the BHP on the advice of a pretty girl, to the 30-year-old who became the CFO of the BHP, then at 35-years-old the CEO, then at 40-years-old the owner, and since then...The BHP has been that oasis for me. I’ve essentially loved every second of it, and I still do. Milton was the epicenter of it all, and the unique experience of studying and working with him, in equal parts insane and inspirational—it was part of the oasis.

A few years after his death, I was teaching class on a Tuesday night as usual, and did my impression of Milton and how he might handle a situation. I turned in my chair to the class to catch the eye of those who would know, and was struck by two impressions at the same time: There were maybe five people there who would have seen him teach personally, and “it” had started to happen: There were fewer and fewer students currently at the school he founded who had ever met him. *Weird*. But the second impression: “Hey, this room is chock full of actors who clearly don’t care that he isn’t around. They’re here because the place has value for them right now, based on the teaching happening right now.” That was me, doing that teaching. In that moment I realized I had come in with an apologetic chip on my shoulder for a long time: “I’m sorry I’m not Milton, I’m gonna bring my best, I think it’s pretty good, but, uh...It’s not going to be him.” It was bullshit. And Milton himself would never have tolerated such a chip in me. And in some way I thus arrived at my own moment of knowing I was the teacher there, no apologies needed.

Back in 2007, Milton had started teaching again during the week. He was always there for his master class on Saturday mornings, but for the weekday nighttime advanced classes, he had been scarce for many years, showing up now and again for a specific scene with a specific actor, often not even taking his chair, but standing at the side of the room and delivering his critique from there, before walking out. There were a range of substitute

teachers who handled the vast bulk of the teaching duties during those years. But earlier in 2007, one of those subs, Gary Imhoff, had himself taken off rather dramatically. He called me one Saturday morning to say that the afternoon Musical Theatre class he had created and taught for years, well, it wouldn't be meeting that day because he had essentially absconded with it, no one would be there, they would all be meeting at some other theatre he had rented, and by the way, *see ya later*. That was the last gesture in a very long story between Milton and Imhoff, and it left a hole in the teaching schedule twice a week for the night-time advanced level classes. Milton picked up that slack personally, much to everyone's surprise and elation. He didn't just stand at the side of the room. He came in, sat down, and did the whole night, 3-4 hours of it. He did exercises, he met new people. And because he was there for four hours at a time, he couldn't just be that S.O.B. who showed up here and there, bellowed his dissatisfaction, and then left. Everyone got to see that far gentler, witty, charming, crazily generous man who yinned his Greek temper's yang.

What we didn't know was that he was beginning to fade. There was the weight loss. The recurring cough. I would receive calls from his number-one assistant Richard Shirley, just saying, "We're out of town." One time, a strange number called my cell phone—it ended up being Milton. Curious, I Googled the phone number, and it was a cancer treatment center in Arizona. There were weeks he was completely out of commission, barely communicating, and when I did hear from him he sounded awful. One morning he arrived to teach his Saturday master class, and was so wobbly from nausea that he couldn't enter the theatre. I and a couple of the students who helped run the class stood around the courtyard as he wandered a bit, taking several minute-long pauses to bend over. After fifteen minutes of this, he just willed himself into the room to teach. And we all never said a word about it. As all this started to occur, he asked that I show up when he was teaching, in case he needed to take off for not feeling well or getting tired. We then had a co-teaching deal going for 18 months before he passed away. Along the way, I remember three moments that forever changed my trajectory and confidence as a teacher:

1. The first time Milton was going to critique a scene that was repeated on notes I gave when he wasn't there. This was

a perilous moment I had observed many times as a student and “executive” in the classes before I started teaching. You could always tell if Milton disagreed with the original notes, no matter how politic he would be about it, and sometimes he wasn’t politic in the least. Frankly, it was pretty clear he disagreed with his substitute teachers’ notes more often than not. I stood in the back of the theatre and felt completely nauseated. I thought the scene was much better, but what would he think about it? He gave nothing away, asking many questions of each actor, about the scene, about the notes they received...Five minutes. Ten minutes of these questions. Finally: “Well. I thought it was just terrific. Excellent...” I practically passed out behind the seats.

2. In 2008, I directed a production of *Rabbit Hole* that was extremely well received, and ran with great houses for three full months or something. Milton’s style was never to come to an actual performance, but rather to get his own preview before the show opened, so he could give his notes and hopefully improve the product before the audience came. So it was with *Rabbit Hole*, and I remember thinking we were on a good track because he didn’t offer any corrections on the direction. He just argued with the playwright in absentia: “You think that kid is right when he says there are other versions of all of us in these multiple universes? Because I’m telling you, there isn’t another me.” Anyway, one night in class he was looking for someone who was absent, and the Stage Manager told him the student was missing because he was “directing a film.” Milton freaked: “He’s not directing a fucking film. Kazan directed film. Sidney Lumet directed film. This guy is not directing a fucking film. Directing isn’t just picking up a fucking camera and press ‘record.’ You guys don’t know what directing is.” Pause. He looked at me. “Who here has seen *Rabbit Hole*?” We had just opened a couple weeks before, so maybe a third of the class had seen it by that time—their hands went up. Milton continued: “Allen Barton is a director.” Holy shit. THAT was “high cotton,” as my southern college roommate used to say.

3. Finally, in the fall of 2008, after several more occasions where he appreciated the work done by actors on my notes, there was a night he took off early. After his last critique, around 9:30pm, he would usually turn to the class and say, "And I now leave you in the capable hands of Allen Barton." But on this particular night, when he had seen another repeat on my notes, he offered that sentence, and as the class broke and people started blithely chatting and moving about, he halted them: "Hey. HEY. LISTEN UP." The chatter stopped. People came back into the theatre. He continued, "And when I say the capable hands of Allen Barton, I mean *the capable fucking hands of Allen Barton.*" And everyone applauded. Stunned, I walked out with him, and I thanked him for the comment. He grabbed my arm and held it tight as we walked to his car: "You're doing great. You're really teaching. And it's influenced by me, without you trying to be me. And don't try to be me, because I'm the only me. You just keep being you."

When I write *that* dialogue, I miss the guy a lot. I can only hope that I balance, in my way, both the toughness and the generosity with the students in my era as he did in his.

Every writer has his or her doubts as they churn out the pages, and certainly the process of treading on the hallowed ground walked by Milton and the many colorful personalities of the BHP—this has generated a tremor or five during the writing process. But those are the same fears that every actor or performer has, and I think part of the duty of a teacher is to lead by example, to blow past that doubting bullshit. So here goes.

PART I

**Learning: Milton, Me &
The BHP**

CHAPTER 1

First Night

I shouldn't be here. I'm in an alley off of Vermont Avenue, south of Franklin, and it's November, it's dark, a bit cold. There's a button that would indicate a buzzer of some sort, and I press it. Nothing. Go home. This is nuts. People like you do not take "acting class." People like you went to arguably the finest university in the world. People like you do whatever it is that Harvard graduates do. Make some goddamned money. Win a Nobel. I knock on the metal-sheathed door. Go home. Now. Turn around. Just...leave! Who gives a shit what Sibel said. You're so fucking pathetic. When are you going to...There's been some mistake, and there is no class here. Clearly I've been given the wrong—

"Hey." The door had opened, a young guy looked out.

"Yeah. I guess I'm supposed to start class tonight?"

"What's your name?"

"Allen. Barton. Last name Barton. First name—"

"Yeah. Cool. I'm Jimmy. C'mon in."

I'm ushered in to a small "lobby" space. Then through a side door to a theatre, where I see people on stage setting up furniture and boxes and such, and we walk behind the stadium-style seating section to another door, and through it into an office. I will end up spending roughly one bazillion hours in this office, in this theatre, the Skylight Theatre, over the next 25+ years. The other bazillion was spent at the headquarters of the Beverly Hills Playhouse on Robertson Boulevard in Beverly Hills, a building I will end up owning, and where I was the day before, interviewing for this stupid fucking acting class, and if I were just a bit quicker on the draw, a bit quicker to listen to my instincts, less in love with Sibel, I'd have turned around a minute before this and I'd have

been on my way home to my first floor apartment at Fountain and Gardner, doing something productive, like...who the hell knows? My first three months in LA had gone by quickly, but consisted mostly of my working an office temp job at Disney Feature Animation, and sitting around the apartment watching the latest news from Operation Desert Storm.

The truly ridiculous thing about this moment was that I had moved to Los Angeles largely to get *away* from Sibel. I had fallen for her, completely unrequited, in my sophomore year at Harvard when I music directed a production of *Godspell* at the Agassi Theatre. And utterly fallen I remained, through junior year, when she starred in another production I music directed, *Little Shop of Horrors*. And disastrously, epically fallen I remained through my senior year, when she had already graduated and moved to New York to pursue acting. Somewhere in the haze of misery, I figured that Los Angeles might provide the necessary distance. If I moved to New York, I'd likely pine over her in close proximity all over again, and I'd end up a drug addict, self-medicating in my studio tent under a bridge somewhere. Los Angeles. It's warmer there anyway, and I was making this decision during a particularly brutal Boston winter. *Los Angeles*. Yeah. I always had a notion about California. Four years earlier, I was going to apply to Stanford for college, but my mother shot that down rather simply: "You will *not* be applying to Stanford." Maybe now was my moment.

And so after graduation, and a summer spent in my hometown of nearby Lexington, painting the house for some spare cash, I moved out west with my brother Fred, who was starting his first year at the USC masters program for film music composition. There were several other Harvard types out there chasing show business, including my new (platonic) roommate Heather Gunn, the future longtime dramaturge for the Center Theatre Group, Pier Carlo Talenti, the future successful playwright Jonathan Tolins, and others...It was a gang. Shortly after arriving, a bunch of us got together, and that was the night I was told that Sibel was in Los Angeles. "Visiting?" I asked. Oh no. No, no, no. She had moved out there with her boyfriend in the time since I had decided the 3,000 miles distance between Los Angeles and Newsibel-Yorksibel would be beneficial to me. Would I like her number? *Sure. Yeah. Sure. I'd like her number.*

About two miles. That's how far her apartment was from the one I'd just moved into. Three thousand had turned into... *Two miles*. Exercising immediate and immense self-control, I saw her as often as I could, which really wasn't that much, given we were "just friends" and all, but it was through Sibel that I heard more about this place called the Beverly Hills Playhouse. She and Jonathan Tolins were both studying there, with some teacher named Al Mancini. I never even heard the name Milton Katselas until I interviewed to study there a few months later, and I didn't care. At the interview, I fast-talked my way into the Intermediate level, even though I'd basically zero official training. But the interviewer went along with my argument that my background of watching actors for countless hours as rehearsal pianist and music director—this qualified me for the Intermediate level, which is where this guy Mancini taught, and that's where Sibel was... Ha! And then, a rare moment of sanity: *Had I moved all this way, just to end up not only in the same school again with her, but the very same class? Was this a formula for my staying there and learning something? Could I please be just slightly less pathetic?* So instead of choosing her class with Mancini on Mondays and Wednesdays at the BHP on Robertson, I chose Mancini's Tuesday/Thursday class over at the Skylight Theatre in Los Feliz, which is where I found myself on a cool, November night in 1990, knocking on that metal-sheathed door, yammering neurotically to myself.

I don't remember what Jimmy Green said to me that night. But given that I took over his job six months later, and then did that same job for another ten years when I "moved up" to the Advanced level class two years later, given that I ended up delivering that speech probably a thousand times, I can retroactively guess that he gave me the basics on how this class was supposed to operate. *You've interviewed at the school, so you know it's a twice-a-week acting class, scene-study based. No frills. Class runs four hours, you're expected to stay the entire time. I'm the "stage manager," sort of like a stage manager on a play or first AD on a film set. I keep track of everything, and if you're going to miss class you call me, or if you have questions or problems or whatever. There are other class executives who help run things, and you'll meet them. Your teacher's name is Al Mancini. You should think about something you want to do first in class—can be a monologue or a scene, or you'll do one of our exercises. Who sent you here? Sibel. Yeah, I think I know her, she's in the other*

class Al teaches. Here's a class list. Here's a thing on class policy—pretty basic, just treat the class like you'd treat a professional job. What's your telephone number? Here are your books that Milton wrote. He's the guy who started the school. Okay, you know that—just checking. So, that's about it—you can take a seat anywhere in the theatre and we'll get going in a few minutes when Al gets here. I'll check in with you at the end of class.

I take my seat. A couple of people say hi to the new guy. Class begins with the teacher's entrance, upon which everyone applauds wildly. This offends my Boston-bred Yankee suspicion of all group-level enthusiasm. *Something fishy here, clearly.* The teacher, Al Mancini, is short, wiry, with dramatic white hair and a clear, crisp voice. He wears a lot of his favorite color: yellow. He drives an old yellow pick-up truck. He smokes the better part of a pack of cigarettes during class, in the theatre, in front of us. The first scene is from *The Only Game in Town*, and it features two actors, one of whom is Michelle Clunie, who would go on to have a decent career, and then much later to have a child by her longtime friend, the filmmaker and producer Bryan Singer. Michelle is a year younger than I am, maybe 21, and she is so pretty. She takes her blouse off during the scene. My eyes pop out. *People do this in acting class? Maybe that's why they're so enthusiastic.* The scene finishes, and the actors receive a nice round of applause. Al delivers his critique, and my life is done.

Firstly, that girl Michelle Clunie who popped my eyes out within fifteen minutes of showing up at the theatre? She became an early scene partner of mine, and then...my first Los Angeles girlfriend! So. On that count alone, the BHP was basically a place where *dreams came fucking true*, because Michelle was way out of my league, and even though the relationship was short-lived and a mess, it forced me out of Sibel-obsession for the first time in three years.

But secondly, this critique. I had just come out of sixteen years of the formal education system, and even though the previous four at Harvard were the fanciest, they were also in many ways the least engaging. That wasn't entirely Harvard's fault—I was just overbaked, academically, and so I didn't put myself into the class work, preferring my extracurricular theatre activities, playing piano for the annual Hasty Pudding Show, hanging out with smart friends over long meals in the dining hall, or imploring

them to blow off their school work to go see a movie. I in fact spent junior and senior years on academic probation, and was in full revolt on the requirement to write fixed page-length papers on this or that. I had quite a bad attitude, which I regret, given the extreme privilege of the opportunity to study there. If I had chosen an honors “concentration” and had to write a thesis, I really doubt I’d have made it out alive.

But now here I was, after all that, in a smallish theatre in Los Feliz, listening to this energetic Al Mancini character analyze the scene, and I was fascinated. He talked about psychology, both the characters’ and the actors’—he placed it all in context of where these two actors had come in their work, the script and its demands, he was funny, perceptive, completely engaging. It seemed that everything he said in that critique, and for the rest of the night, could be related exactly to people I’d known, behaviors I’d seen, the stuff going on in the streets and at 7-11. It struck me, oddly, as the most relevant teaching experience I’d witnessed. I felt it completely relevant and applicable to my life. I came back two days later for my second class. Ditto.

Time came for my first scene, which was actually a monologue I found somewhere. It was something about a young man jilted by his girlfriend, and I decided to make him a writer, at his typewriter, trying to figure out what to say about it all as he typed. I remember on the day I was scheduled to perform, I felt nervous for hours beforehand, while working my latest temp job downtown. I’m sure it was quite mediocre at best. I finished, sat anxiously in a chair in front of the class, and Mancini looked at me for a few seconds at the beginning of the critique. Already this was new to me—I’d either been in the standard “lecture to dozens (or at Harvard, even hundreds) of students” format of normal school education, or piano lessons. And piano lessons are of course one-on-one, but there actually isn’t that much eye contact... You play, they correct, you play, they correct... Here was this man, Al Mancini, sitting there, smoking a cigarette, just... *Looking at me*. Five seconds. Ten seconds. Finally, he spoke: “You’re a musician.”

“How’d you know that?”

He pointed to his own face. “The eyes, baby. The eyes.” The class laughed. They were used to this kind of perception.

"Well, yeah. Classical pianist since I was four."

"I got that. I saw it. You know how?"

"How?"

"You have a bubble of humanity in you. The way you do this monologue. It has music. You like to find the music."

"Okay."

"Okay? It's probably better than okay, man. How long you been here in Los Angeles?"

"Just got here. Three months ago."

"You have a piano in your place?"

"Ha! No, no...I mean...Once I graduated, my parents were..."

"Graduated where?"

"Harvard."

"Shit, man."

"Yeah."

"Where you from?"

"Boston."

"Boston. Harvard. I'm getting the picture." He laughed. *At me? Or just...In front of me?*

"...So anyway, my parents had always paid for the piano lessons, so now, it's, you know... 'Welcome to the world. Over to you.'"

"Catholic?"

"WASP."

"So what are you going to do about that?"

"About what?"

"About the piano in your place?"

"Uh..."

"Uh, what?"

"I don't know."

"Those are the only three words we don't allow."

"Okay." *What. Is. Happening?*

"We're not wild about 'okay' either. How about this: You get a piano in your place by the end of the month, or you're out of class."

"Like...Kicked out?"

“You got it, baby. Once a musician, always a musician. You can’t not have a piano. I won’t allow it. I have a piano in my place. Used to be, everyone did. You’re good, right?”

“I guess, yeah.”

“You guess? I don’t like false modesty, myself. You’ll play for us. You’ll get a piano, you’ll play for us.”

So I got a piano, a piece of crap rental upright with 85 working keys. I didn’t think I’d do that much with it, and on that count I would end up being very, very wrong. But I wanted to stay in class with Mancini, and those were the terms. Welcome to the Beverly Hills Playhouse.

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