

# Confessions of an unrepentant Maoist

By Ed Felien

## I. How it all began (2015 August Riv, September PP, Nok)

I remember when it happened. It was 1961. I had just started graduate school at the University of Minnesota. I was doing research for a history of theater seminar. I was assigned a report on the Abbey Theater and Irish drama, and the professor asked me to say a few things about Chinese theater. There wasn't much to say about China. There was the Peking Opera, a 19th century stylized melodramatic opera with acrobatics and broad farce. And I thought I should mention that Mei Lanfang, the most famous of the female impersonators (all the roles were played by men), grew a mustache during the Japanese occupation so he wouldn't have to perform.

Then I came across a note in a book saying if one wanted to understand contemporary theater in China, one should read Mao Zedong's essay "Talks at the Yen-an Art Forum." What's this? A head of state has opinions on art and theater? The only pronouncement I had heard from a head of state about art was Dwight D. Eisenhower's "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like," which was somehow a repudiation of modern art.

So, I managed to find a copy of the essay and sat down on the floor in the stacks and read it. It was amazing. Mao reduced all of art criticism to one simple question: "Whom does it serve?" If culture only entertained, without taking into consideration the struggles of working people, then it was taking the side of the established classes, the status quo. Revolutionary art had to consciously understand and sympathize with the oppressed class, or it was supporting the oppressors.

I will never forget the revelation. I was immediately reminded of one old style actor on seeing a more realistic performance by Edmund Kean in the early part of the 19th century, and he said, "If he is right, then we're all wrong." And, of course, the more realistic method of acting became more popular, and the older, bombastic style of acting became outmoded. If Mao was right, then all the theater that I had studied, all the plays that I had acted in, and all the theater I had ever seen was reactionary. It supported the status quo. It reaffirmed the ruling class. It was directly opposed to the best hopes of my mother and father and my brothers and my friends who were working people.

I remember sitting on that floor in that university library and realizing that I had to choose. I had to pick sides. Would I be an entertainer and prop up the establishment, or would I work to create revolutionary art that would support my class? I had no idea where the second choice would lead, but I knew then that my life had changed.

## II. The Bay of Pigs, April, 1961(2015 September Riv, October PP, Nok)

I was working for the University Theater Department Box Office delivering flyers for an upcoming show. I was climbing the long marble steps to the big auditorium on campus, and I noticed a small group of demonstrators holding picket signs saying, "Hands Off Cuba." I knew

some of the picketers, so I asked them what was happening. They told me the U.S. had just invaded Cuba. I was shocked. John F. Kennedy invaded Cuba? It seemed unbelievable. I went inside to deliver my posters and when I came out my friends in the Fair Play For Cuba Committee were being pelted by snowballs by a group of right-wingers from Young Americans For Freedom. Like an idiot, I stepped in between the two groups and said, "I may not agree with what these people are saying, but I defend their right to say it." For a while that actually calmed things down as people from the two sides began debating the question. It finally came down to whether the U.S. had the right to invade another country just because they were communist. I didn't think we had that right. The YAF kids were disappointed in my conclusion, but they didn't resume throwing snowballs.

Later, after Nov.22, 1963, when it became known that Lee Harvey Oswald had tried to organize a chapter of the Fair Play For Cuba Committee in New Orleans, the group disappeared. Oswald thought he could hasten the revolution by assassinating Kennedy. In fact, his actions fueled anti-Castro Cubans and strengthened support for an embargo that has seriously harmed the Cuban economy and the Cuban people for more than 50 years. Oswald committed what Mao called the military error. Revolutionaries and anarchists sometimes think they can bring about instant change by a bomb or a bullet, when what is needed is long-term political education. Kevin Phillips in "Bush Dynasty" gives convincing evidence that the operations director for the CIA of the Bay of Pigs fiasco was probably George H.W. Bush. The boats launched from an island Bush had rented, and the two boats were named Houston and Barbara.

### **III. The March on Washington, August, 1963 (2015 October Riv, November PP, Nok)**

By the time of the March on Washington I was already too radical to believe I was needed or wanted. It was to be a mostly black affair, and communists and Marxists weren't invited. Organizers of the March had been fending off criticisms that the March was organized and dominated by communists. In fact, the FBI and the racist Southern politicians were actually close to the truth. A. Phillip Randolph, the head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and one of two organizers of the March, had run for state controller in New York as a Socialist in 1920, and Bayard Rustin, the other organizer, was a socialist and gay. So, no one on the left wanted to go to the demonstration holding up a crazy left-wing sign and screw up the message. Probably over 250,000 people showed up, 60,000 or so of them white.

I was in Manhattan staying with friends. We had our own March, around White Castle hamburger joints that had the policy of hiring just one black person in an otherwise white crew. This was my first protest demonstration. I was arguing with my friend in the subway to the Bronx about how maybe this was unnecessary and maybe things would get better by themselves. I remember continuing the discussion all the while threading my way through angry young white counter demonstrators, between mounted police and climbing under wooden barricades. When we finally reached the other side and the site of the demonstration, I found that the only other person on our side of the barricades was a very short young black guy with a CORE (Congress Of Racial Equality) T-shirt on. He was quite happy to see us. We picked up signs and started marching around the hamburger stand. I tried to talk calmly and cheerfully to the angry white guys screaming at us. They said, "What about Chock Full O Nuts, they only hire black people and one white guy?" I tried to explain how the dominant white culture actually sets the agenda for racial discrimination in hiring. And I was sure that black-owned Chock Full O Nuts would

change their hiring practice as soon as White Castle changed theirs. Aside from the excitement of an angry crowd and six or so mounted police, the most interesting moment came when two baseball teams showed up. One white and the other black. The black team had won, and their prize was that the white team would treat them to White Castle hamburgers. We talked to the black team members. They decided they could do without their prize and not cross our fragile picket line. It was the most important victory of the day.

#### **IV. Graduate School, 1961 to 1966 (2015 November Riv, December PP, Nok)**

I graduated with my B.A. in June of 1960. That was it. I'd done everything I was supposed to do. I'd been a good Catholic boy, until I couldn't handle the emotional, psychological and philosophical contradictions, and I just quit. I grew tired of the Jesuit reasoning that conjured up arguments to make every natural question or impulse something somehow contrary to God's grace. Finally, like a house of cards, it collapsed, and I walked away from it without bothering to pick up the pieces.

I had been an Eagle Boy Scout—St. Helena's Troop 38. I enjoyed the camaraderie of overnights. But I chafed at the military structure, the authoritarian chain of command. Finally, by the end, when I was 15, I would find the campsite where the overnight was going to be, and the night before I would go there and bury a six pack of beer for me and my buddies to drink the next night around the campfire.

So, when I graduated from college in June of 1960 I quite reasonably assumed there was nothing meaningful left for me to do with my life. I began listening to Beethoven quartets and contemplating suicide. I was thoroughly enjoying my melancholia when I discovered my condition was a common literary device. "The Sorrows of Young Werther"—a young beautiful, idealistic artist, contaminated and corrupted by an ugly world finds no solution but to end his life. How perfect. How sweet. How stupid and mundane. How trite. So, I did that for a couple of months and then went to graduate school.

By the end of graduate school, when I had just about run out of courses to take, I managed to convince a professor to let me take a readings course from him. I would submit a list of books I wanted to read. He would approve it, and then I'd write a short critique of the book at the end of the quarter. It was a lovely way to earn credits, and I read Dickens, Marx's *Capital*, Volume I and Karl Polanyi's "The Great Transformation," which begins: "Nineteenth century civilization has collapsed." Before World War I, crowned heads ruled all the nations of Europe. By the end of the Great War they were all replaced with parliaments. I used the concept as the starting point for my Ph.D. dissertation.

#### **V. My dissertation (2015 December Riv, 2016 January PP, Nok)**

Before the 20th century, drama entertained by telling a story. The first modern innovation came with Henrik Ibsen's introduction of social purpose to the story; his plays used drama to prove a thesis: a woman's need for self-actualization—"A Doll's House"; the need to confront a community about its hypocrisy—"An Enemy of the People." I loved it that Ibsen wrote a new play every two years in time for the Christmas shopping season, and his characters always alternated between his two favorite polarities. First it was Gyntian, after Peer Gynt, an easy-going, morally compromised character who at the end of the play is met by a Button Molder who

says Peer will have to be melt down with the other spoilt goods. This is contrasted in the next play by the uncompromising idealist, Pastor Brand, who takes his congregation to the foot of a glacier to consecrate a new and difficult faith, and, when he defies the avalanche and is about to be consumed by the mountain, he hears in the roar of his destruction, "God is love." The Brandian act of Nora in leaving her husband and children to become something more than a doll in a doll's house is matched in "Ghosts, the next play, by the morally compromised Mrs. Alving, who stayed with her philandering husband and contracted syphilis.

The title of my dissertation was "The Evolution of Form in the Modern European Drama." I used Aristotle's elements of drama: plot, character, thought, diction, song and spectacle to illustrate the collapse of 19th century dramatic form and the beginnings of modern dramatic structures that represented significant leaps in cultural consciousness in the plays of Ibsen, Strindberg, Brecht and Beckett.

Ibsen's plays follow the structures of the well-made plays of 19th century melodrama, but by turning the plays into an argument he begins the process of alienating and calling attention to the plot. This forces the audience to see a plot unfold and imagine a different ending. Strindberg wrote plays in that mold until he went mad in Berlin with Edvard Munch, and after that his plays took on a more expressionistic tone. Plot no longer is significant. It is arbitrary. "To Damascus" is a journey to and from in a series of epiphanies. The plot doesn't matter. What matters is the agony of the protagonist. "A Dream Play" is a series of surrealistic tableaux with the stage finally exploding into a giant chrysanthemum. The dramatic focus was now the character. What happened in the plot was not as important as the revelation of the character. Brecht began writing after World War I. German Expressionism in the theater in that period was dominated by learning plays like Georg Kaiser's "Gas I," that showed the exploitation and dehumanization of capitalism. The personality of the leading character is irrelevant to the central argument of the concept that must be explained. Brecht developed the Alienation Theory to explain this new theatrical device. The plot is irrelevant. At the beginning of the play actors explain what is going to take place, and each scene begins with a summary of the action. There are no revelations of character, no idiosyncratic psychology, only the unrelenting argument of the play. Plot and character are gone, only the thought and conclusions of the audience are important.

Samuel Beckett takes this progression to its logical conclusion. If life is meaningless, then thought is without purpose. We spend a large part of our life waiting, waiting for buses, waiting to see the doctor—all in the hope of getting somewhere or getting somehow better. We are waiting for Godot, a self-constructed meaning that we know is illusory. If plot, character and thought are no longer useful in understanding the human predicament, then all that is left is the diction (poetry) and song to accompany the spectacle.

I began my dissertation with the quotation from Bertrand Russell's 1904 essay, "A Free Man's Worship." "That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to

stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built."

## **VI. Graduate School politics (2016 January Riv, February PP, Nok)**

But before I could write my dissertation, I had to pass my written prelim's, a three-day ordeal that was more like a madcap game of Trivial Pursuit: What is a Dutch brush? (a six-inch wide paint brush). Frustrated at the banality of the questions, I perked up at one that asked what books would you recommend to teach beginning acting? Of course, the answer that was expected was Stanislavsky's "An Actor Prepares" and "Building a Character." But I was more inclined to a Brechtian style of acting so I recommended Jerzy Grotowski's "Towards a Poor Theater" and Brecht's "Practical Lessons for Actors," which were outside the normal experience of the Stanislavsky method acting techniques. I was sure I had done well on all of the other questions, so I thought I could take some liberties with predictable expectations. The head of the department called me into his office a couple of weeks later. He tried to explain how the answer to the acting question was wrong. I said, "You and I disagree on an opinion about what is an acceptable acting style. If my references are good and the curriculum makes sense, then my opinion is as valid as yours."

He got up from behind his desk, went outside the office and brought in two other professors from the department. There was an awkward silence. I said, "Doc and I disagree on an opinion, and I don't want to appear pugnacious, but I don't feel I have to capitulate on an opinion."

The first of the two said, "Pugnacious? Pugnacious? I should say you're being pugnacious."

The second one chimed in, "Capitulate? Capitulate? you have to capitulate. You have to write a dissertation."

"But I thought everyone had to write a dissertation," I said.

They got up to leave and the first one said to me, "I want to see you in my office after this."

After getting some reading assignments from Doc I went to see the other professor. He said, "What were you doing in there? You almost threw your Ph.D. out the window."

"Well, it's not worth that much to me," I said.

"You have what I call a 'Sibley complex.'" [Mulford Q. Sibley was a professor of political science, a socialist and Quaker pacifist.]

"Well, actually, I admire Sibley."

"Besides, it wasn't just that one question."

"What other question? What else did I get wrong?"

"No, it wasn't that. It was your attitude."

"My attitude?"

"The department thinks you think we're a bunch of idiots."

"Well, I can't be responsible for your mass paranoia," and I stormed out of the office. I went to see Doc a few weeks later. We talked about Stanislavsky and the contribution of the method school of acting, and the department agreed to pass me on my written prelims. But they got their revenge. The oral prelims are mostly perfunctory. The department will ask general questions to test your knowledge, but it's really a test of collegiality—how well do you get along within the academic structure? And I failed that, and I knew it. They said I failed my orals but I could take them again in a year, and in the meantime I could write my dissertation—which seemed enough of an assurance that I would eventually pass that I accepted my chastisement cheerfully.

They passed me on my second oral prelims, and I had one last major hurdle: my final oral exam where I defended my thesis. In the year that I was writing my dissertation three books came out that confirmed the basis of my thesis even if they didn't quite take my approach: "The Flower and the Castle" by Maurice Valency was a thorough analysis of the plays of Ibsen and Strindberg, and Martin Esslin came out with "The Theater of the Absurd," and in the same year, a thoroughly scholarly analysis of the plays of Brecht. At first I was devastated. A lot of what I thought was original in my writing was now already in print by these other scholars. But, then, I felt vindicated. I had begun work on my dissertation before these books came out. So, it was clear I wasn't plagiarizing anyone else's ideas. I credited them and noted them in my bibliography. But, more than that, I came to see that ideas cannot be owned by anyone. They are part of the social and cultural context. And in that sense they belong to everyone. At my final orals, the professor who accused me of having a Sibley complex had, unfortunately, been given a copy of my dissertation that the typist had not corrected, so he gleefully pointed out typos for the better part of a half hour. But I felt he was working up to something. I apologized for the uncorrected proof, and the other readers assured him that their copies were without the offending errors. But, finally, he got to the object of his hunt, "And here you say that Dada was primarily French when everyone knows it was German."

"Well, it probably begins in Switzerland and moves to Berlin, but it becomes a movement in Paris, ultimately influencing notions of surrealism and laying the foundation for the theater of the absurd. Isn't that right, Professor Hurrell?" I said, turning for support to my thesis advisor from the English Department. "Mmmm, yes," he muttered.

And there the matter ended. It ended not with a bang but with a mutter. Everyone got up and congratulated me, and I had earned my Ph.D.

## **VII. Teaching in the Rhetoric Department (2016 February Riv, March PP, Nok)**

After a couple of years in graduate school, and after earning a masters' degree, I was looking around for a possible teaching position at the U of M. I heard they were hiring in the Rhetoric Department at the Institute of Agriculture on the St. Paul campus. I taught my first college class there in the fall of 1962. It was Beginning Speech, and I was supposed to give an introductory lecture to four assembled sections in front of the head of that department. It was a disaster. I tried to do way too much. In a 50-minute lecture, at 8 o'clock in the morning, for their first college class in their first quarter of their freshman year, I tried to teach farm kids fresh from the country in one short lecture the scope and breadth of literature from Ancient Greece up to the moderns. Looking back, I'm amazed they didn't throw things at me.

But I loved teaching and I soon got the hang of it. I taught a couple of speech classes and some freshman English classes. In my first freshman English class I had a cowboy who wrote about shoeing horses and riding in rodeos. I thought I was in heaven. Helping him with small things but encouraging him to write made me believe I was doing something useful.

A few years later I was grading papers. The assignment was to analyze a poem. An older student had written about an audience "listening to their wireless, sipping their cowslip tea." There were no quotation marks and no context for the paragraph. Obviously the student had plagiarized a critical essay of the poem written 50 years before. I gave the student an F and wrote that he was seriously in jeopardy of being thrown out of college. A younger student that I liked came in to see me. He explained that the older student was a driving instructor at his old

high school, and he had been told that he had to take some college classes to keep his job. I talked to the older student, explained what plagiarism was, told him about quotation marks and citing sources, and gave him a C for the course. Inflexible standards of scholarship were not as significant, I found out, as a man keeping his job.

I enjoyed the lunches at the faculty club. I loved the banter, the discussions about the war in Vietnam, but I was naïve about the politics of the department. I believed academic freedom meant you should think and consider all possibilities of everything. I had discovered marijuana, and like every other idiot who wants to share his joy with the world I told some of my friends in the department. Eventually, the head of the department called me in and told me that this academic year would be my last. It was being done in a nice way, very friendly, but it was clear I was being fired. There was nothing wrong with my teaching. I had completed my Ph.D. by this time, but I just didn't measure up to the Institute of Agriculture Department of Rhetoric's notion of what it meant to be an academic. I didn't fit in. I wasn't collegial.

I had been looking for a full-time position for the past year, and this development added urgency to the search. I went to a speech teacher's convention in Chicago that winter and interviewed for jobs. I make a good first impression. It's only after someone gets to know me for a while that they realize how much trouble I can be. I was offered two jobs—an assistant professorship at Smith College or an assistant professorship at the University of Houston. I did a quick calculation and decided that I'd probably get killed teaching in Texas and it would be safer and more fun to teach the ruling class under glass at Smith.