

My Back Pages 29 Rich Lynch



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articles and essays by Rich Lynch

And so it's the Holiday Season again. This is probably my favorite time of year and it's not just because of all the subliminal energy that seems to be infused into the ether around us. For me it's also a celebration of making it *through* the year – at my age the only real goal for each year is to make it to the next year.

So with all that in mind I decided this issue of *MBP* should be specifically built around the Holiday Season. We're already long past the date when festive music starts getting played on radio stations so it seems appropriate, for the first essay, that I should tell you about what's absolutely, positively my favorite Christmas song. Any guesses?

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It's Not Really Christmas Until...

So here we are again. Another holiday season. As we've all no doubt observed, it seems to start earlier and earlier every year. Way back when I was a pre-teen, nobody really got serious about Christmas until the beginning of December. This year, I noticed that some houses on my street had their holiday lights turned on the week before Thanksgiving. And the local home improvement store has had gaudy artificial Christmas trees for sale since *the first week of October!*



Christmas trees for sale in early October

If you're starting to believe I'm turning into a curmudgeon, I can assure you I haven't. At least I don't think so. There's lots about the holiday season that I really enjoy and one of them is all the seasonal music that gets played that time of year. All kinds of holiday music, actually. Everything from pop to jazz to blues to classical to traditional. And other stuff that's less easily categorized. For instance, I'm a big fan of the late John Fahey, an acoustic guitarist who popularized the so-called 'American Primitive Guitar' subgenre. He did a couple of holiday music albums that are just superb in how he interpreted some of the more popular songs of the season. But there's one singer and one specific song that I *always* look forward to hearing – so much so that I don't think it's really Christmas until I do. And that would be Darlene Love's "Christmas (Baby, Please Come Home)".

Back in the early 1960s she was making a living mostly as a background vocals singer for the Ronettes and other popular recording artists of that era. In the latter part of 1963, record producer Phil Spector was putting together a holiday music compilation album and wanted to include something newly composed by the great songwriting duo Ellie Greenwich and Jeff Barry. He brought in Ronnie Bennett (of The Ronettes) to sing the lead vocal but after listening to the track he decided that she hadn't put enough raw emotion into the song. And so Darlene got her opportunity instead. Ever since then "Christmas (Baby, Please Come Home)" has been a holiday standard. And it made Darlene Love famous.



I like the song because of the very thing that Phil Spector had demanded – its raw emotion and resulting high energy. As well as a pretty terrific melody. This year is the 60th anniversary of its original release and over the decades it's been covered more than 170 times by artists as disparate as U2, Joey Ramone, Dion, Smash Mouth, and the Dropkick Murphys. And most recently it's been covered by Cher in a duet with Darlene. They sang it on the recent *Christmas in Rockefeller Center* TV special and I thought it was almost as good as the 1963 version.

So anyway, after I heard that I decided it was finally time. Let the holiday season begin! ☀

Afterword:

I know I'm *never* gonna get tired of that song. Next is another music-themed essay, about a composer whose music I'm also never gonna get tired of hearing. If only I could travel back in time to meet him...

A Genre-Adjacent Essay Appropriate for Today

As the *Peanuts* cartoon in the newspaper reminds us, today is Ludwig von Beethoven's birthday. His 252nd, to be exact, and the local classical music radio station is celebrating the day by airing many of Beethoven's best-known compositions. The one I was listening to during the one o'clock hour was my favorite of all – his fourth piano concerto. And in doing so, I indulged in a bit of mental gymnastics that we all probably have done at one time or another: If we were somehow gifted with a one-time ability to time travel into the past, what *single event* would we most want to witness?



You can probably guess where this essay is headed. It would be very tempting to go back to July 1939 so that I could take part in the very first Worldcon but I've read and listened to enough first-hand accounts of what happened there that I vicariously *already* feel like I was a participant. Same goes for many other famous events that have occurred throughout the history of science fiction fandom – I am blessed that I've had the honor of meeting and befriending some of those First Fandom 'dinosaurs' and have helped to preserve their memories of those times. So no, if I'm limited to a single event my time travel aspirations would be a lot different than that. And as an avid admirer of Beethoven and his music, it would actually be an easy choice – I'd go back more than 200 years so that I could attend one of the most famous classical music concerts ever staged.

It happened on December 22, 1808. On a very cold evening in Vienna, in an unheated concert hall, Ludwig von Beethoven gave his final performance as a concert pianist. It was for the public debut of his 4th piano concerto, but the concert also included the first public performances of two of Beethoven's most prominent orchestral compositions – the 6th "Pastoral" symphony and the glorious 5th symphony which because of its famous opening theme has come to be known as the "Symphony of Fate". In all there were eight different works performed that evening, including two sections of his "Mass in C Major" and a concert aria for soprano soloist and orchestra. And, as a whole, it did not go well.



Theater an der Wien in Vienna, site of the famous 1808 Beethoven concert

The unheated concert hall was only a small part of the problem, though it must have been arduous for audience as well as the musicians to persevere for the four hours it took to complete the program. A bigger issue was that the event had been scheduled on short notice and up against another concert that same evening to which many of the most experienced musicians in the city had been contractually committed. As a result, the orchestra was comprised largely of amateur and semi-professional musicians who turned out to be very much under-rehearsed. Even the soprano soloist was an inexperienced teen-ager who had been recruited at the last minute, and who had apparently suffered from stage fright. It all must have resulted in glorious chaos. Which is one of the reasons the concert is as famous as it is.

And yet, to paraphrase poet and author José Harris, from truth there is beauty. There are written accounts of the evening which were more than a bit critical, as you might expect, but they mostly relate that the event was so long that it became, in effect, too much of a good thing. There are no accounts (that I can find, anyway) of attendees leaving prior to the event's conclusion. I can almost get the impression that people witnessing it knew they were in the presence of greatness.

And that's where I'd want to be, if it were only possible. Beethoven's 4th piano concerto is, in my opinion, the finest piano concerto ever written and also the composition which most deeply reveals his inner self, especially the middle section which seems reflective of turmoil he experienced at various times of his life. He is not described as a happy man. But he was apparently an avid beer drinker, so if I'd been there I would have bought him a stein of Vienna's finest at his favorite hangout. And, assuming I'd been gifted with fluency in German as well as the ability to time travel, I'd have listened avidly to any stories he might have told as he was enjoying his brew. I am sure he had his own fandom. I wonder what he'd think of ours. ☀

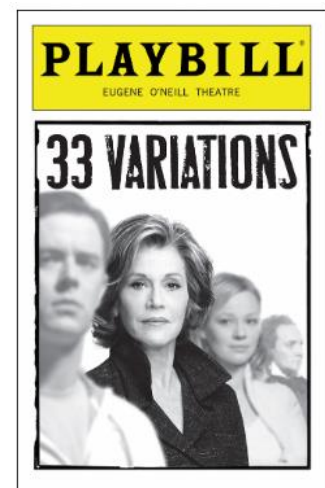


sketch of Beethoven (ca. 1808)
by Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld

Afterword:

I checked, and there are quite a few movies about Beethoven. And there's even a stage play (*33 Variations*, which I've yet to see). But from what I can tell, none of them include anything about that amazing 1808 concert. Someday there's gonna be a play or musical which does. There's just gotta be.

Next up is an essay that includes descriptions of theatrical productions which *do* exist. Each January, Nicki and I take a mini-vacation to New York to see Broadway shows and visit interesting museums. Except for 2021 and 2022, when the pandemic put the kibosh on that. So after being away for three years, I guess we kinda expected that there would be some changes we'd notice. And boy, were there ever!



Escape to New York

Prolog: It Ain't Right and It Ain't Natural

It had been three years, *three effing years*, since the previous time that Nicki and I had visited New York City. Three years!

Until the coronavirus figuratively had reared its ugly head back in 2020, we used to do an early January mini-vacation to the Big Apple every year. You might think that's not a great time to be there, what with all the wind chill and occasional polar vortex blizzards, but it's actually ideal for doing what we want to do – stay in a nice Times Square hotel and see lots of Broadway shows. We don't mind the cold weather – we're both originally from parts of the country where the winter weather is much worse than in New York City – and there is a benefit for planning a mid-winter visit: early January is low season in terms of room rates and ticket prices. Or at least, it used to be...

But not this year! We emerged from the subway ride from Penn Station to find Times Square practically shoulder-to-shoulder with people. Thousands of them! It was stunning, and it made us wonder what the heck was going on. We thought that maybe they were just letting loose because of what they perceived as the end of the pandemic (no matter that it's not yet over). Maybe they were just holdovers from the New Year's Eve celebration from three days earlier. Or *maybe* there were throngs of people out and about because of the weather. You see, it was warm in New York. Really really warm.

We'd brought winter coats with us but on that day we hadn't needed them – it was, no fooling, more than 60°F in the Square! It was as if April had arrived three months early. Nicki summarized the situation by quoting a lyric from the *Hadestown* musical: “It ain't right and it ain't natural.” Wasn't *that* the truth!

Ch-ch-ch-changes

As we expected and (to a certain extent) as we feared, the past three years have brought about some changes to the Theatre District of New York. One of them was that our favorite hotel, the Marriott Marquis, had greatly raised its room rates. So much so that we decided to stay elsewhere. I'd known about this a week or so before the trip so after a bit of rate comparison we found a pretty good alternative – the Renaissance, serendipitously located even closer than the Marquis was to the TKTS discount ticket booth at the north end of the Square. This meant we could mostly avoid picking our way through the multitudes who had congregated in the Square. And it allowed us to more quickly join the TKTS queue to buy theatre tickets for Broadway shows. Shorter stays in line translated to better seats. Probably.

Another change we observed first hand, a really dismaying one, was that our favorite eatery in the city had gone out of business. Pergola Des Artists, a small



the long TKTS queue

family-run French restaurant, is sadly no more. We'd discovered the place about a decade ago on a previous January trip because one of its employees had been handing out discount coupons to people in the TKTS queue. Nicki was a big fan of their very delicious French Onion Soup and there were invariably some excellent entrees available on its *prix fixe* menu. I'd emailed them about a year into the pandemic to see how they were coping and got back a response that they were, basically, hanging in there. A lot of their evening business had been from people who were going to a show afterwards, so when Broadway mostly closed down for an extended period it must have really financially squeezed them. And now they're gone.

Taking over its space is an Irish pub which had good enough food that we'll probably eat there again on our next trip to New York. Assuming it doesn't also go the way of Pergola Des Artists, that is. There is construction going on in a vacant lot next door to the pub and when we asked about it we were informed that Disney is building a new hotel there. If that's indeed the case then I have a pretty good idea what will happen: Disney will acquire the buildings adjacent to the construction site and the monthly lease for businesses in those buildings (including the pub) will be jacked up to the point where they can no longer make ends meet. And after they've departed the scene, those buildings will be razed so that the footprint for the new hotel can be larger. Or that a more modern building can be built for Disney-themed shops and restaurants. If this is to be the way of the future, I'd rather remain in the past.

The worst changes of all were for both the price and availability of Broadway tickets, at least for shows that we'd really wanted to see. Number One on our priority list had been *Phantom of the Opera*. The show was in its last few months, after a 35-year continuous run, and we'd wanted to see it one final time before it closed. But it was not to be. 'Seeing it one final time' was apparently a very popular idea, because what had been fairly easy tickets to get prior to the closure announcement were now were impossible for any reasonable price. We checked at the box office and what few tickets that were available for any of the shows during our stay were priced in the \$350-\$400 range. It was even worse for the show that I'd most wanted to see – *The Music Man*, which had the famous Broadway actors Hugh Jackman and Sutton Foster headlining the cast. I'd been informed by the TKTS people that every performance was invariably a sell-out, or close to it. When I checked online I found a few seats available for some of the performances, but that's where the good news ended. The ones close to the stage were priced at more than \$700 each, while the ones 10-15 rows back were 'only' about \$400 apiece.

It was disappointing but you know, we were in New York. And, as usual, there was no lack of other good options.

Four Days, Five Shows (part one)

Who knew that a puppet of a cow would be such a scene-stealer? That was the case for the first show we took in, a revival of one of Stephen Sondheim's most famous musicals, *Into the Woods*. The cast was headlined by Tony Award winners Gavin Creel, Joaquina Kalukango, and Stephanie J. Block, but the star of the show was Milky White. Much of the credit for that goes to her 'handler', Kennedy Kanagawa, a newcomer to Broadway who had the skill to provide the puppet a great range of motion and, perhaps



Milky White with her handler, Kennedy Kanagawa

surprisingly, a great range of facial emotion. We're all probably at least somewhat familiar with the plot of the musical – it's a mash-up of four Brothers Grimm fairy tales: “Rapunzel”, “Cinderella”, “Jack and the Beanstalk”, and “Little Red Riding Hood”. These are all brought together by a quest: a baker and his wife, to lift a witch's curse, must obtain four magical ingredients – a cow as white as milk, a cape as red as blood, some hair as yellow as corn, and a slipper as pure as gold. By the end of the first act, things are resolved to the point where it seems like every character has secured his or her happy ending. And then in the second act, Sondheim blows it all up.

It's not an easy musical to categorize. These are not the Disney-ized treatments of the Brothers Grimm that we're used to seeing – for many of the characters, things do get rather grim. But there's lightness as well, especially in the scenes involving Milky White. Overall we liked it a lot, and it marked a return for us to the St. James Theatre. Back in July of 2008, it was where we took in our very first Broadway musical. May there be many more for us there.

Our next show was the only matinee of the trip and boy, was it a good one! Back in May 2018, the Shubert Organization announced that it had acquired the rights to adapt the classic 1959 Billy Wilder comic crime movie *Some Like It Hot* for the stage as a new Broadway musical. It was done at warp speed, I think, because the show jumped straight to Broadway without any out-of-town tryouts. Previews at the Shubert Theatre started back at the beginning of November with opening night in mid-December.

Most of us have probably either seen or are at least are somewhat familiar with the 1959 movie which starred Tony Curtis, Jack Lemmon, and Marilyn Monroe. It's set in the late 1920s gangster era and follows two musicians who witness a mob-connected murder in Chicago and have to hurriedly get out of town to avoid being killed, disguising themselves as women in an all-female jazz band. The Broadway musical keeps this same plot, but with a few interesting differences. There is music and some songs in the movie, including four that were sung by Monroe, but these were discarded in favor of a very fine new score by Tony Award winning songwriters Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman. And the non-singing movie roles played by Lemmon and Curtis were now fully song-and-dance and played by two very capable Broadway veterans, J. Harrison Ghee and two-time Tony Award winner Christian Borle.

But there was an even more intriguing change: the all-female jazz band in the movie was an *all white* female jazz band. For the musical it was largely African American, including another very capable Broadway veteran, Adrianna Hicks, as the lead singer who had been played by Monroe in the movie. This provided an opportunity for the new show, as an undercurrent, to delve into racial discrimination aspects of being non-white singers and musicians back then, and it was done very well. As also was the show's exploration of gender norms. In the 1959 movie there was no doubt that the Curtis and Lemmon characters, while disguised as women, still very much identified themselves as men. That was not quite the case for the musical – after a while, Ghee's character becomes so comfortable in existing as a woman that there is a lot of misgiving about whether or not to eventually end the pretense.



outside the Shubert Theatre on January 4th

But the nuances of the plot were not what drew Nicki and me to the show. No, what made us want to see it was what we most enjoy in a Broadway musical – great songs and entertaining dance. And *Some Like It Hot* had a lot of both throughout the show. The best of the best was the title song, a true showstopper, which closed out the first act and featured an extended ensemble tap sequence which reminded me a lot of my all-time favorite musical, *Anything Goes*, in how it was all structured. It was such a great musical that on the way out of the theatre I had to ponder if *Some Like It Hot* was as good as *Anything Goes*. I don't think I'm ready to say that just yet, but you know what? It for sure comes damn close. I absolutely would like to see it again.

An Afternoon Amid the Zombie Apocalypse

There are *many* things we'd like to see again whenever we come to New York, and some of them are museums. It shouldn't come as a surprise, to anyone who knows me, for me to say that I like museums. A lot. Art museums, history museums, science museums, cultural museums, sports museums, you name it. They're all good. Nicki and I live in the D.C. area so we have a membership to the Smithsonian Institution. If we lived in New York City, I know we'd be members of the Metropolitan Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art. And also one other place.

That would be the Museum of the Moving Image. It's located over in Queens, adjacent to the Kaufman Astoria Studios, and as far as I can tell it seems to be a mostly undiscovered gem. It's not huge as museums go, with just under 100,000 square feet of exhibit space (MoMA, by comparison, is more than seven times larger), but it makes very effective use of the room it has. An example of this is MotMI's core exhibition, *Behind the Screen*, which might be best described as an immersive stroll through the various stages of making movies, television shows, and online



the Stop Motion Animation interactive studio at MotMI



mechanical puppet used during filming of *The Exorcist*

productions such as creating a soundtrack, lighting, model making, special effects, and editing. There are small studios where visitors to the museum can try their hand at doing stuff like voice-overs, foley sound effects, and rudimentary stop motion animation.

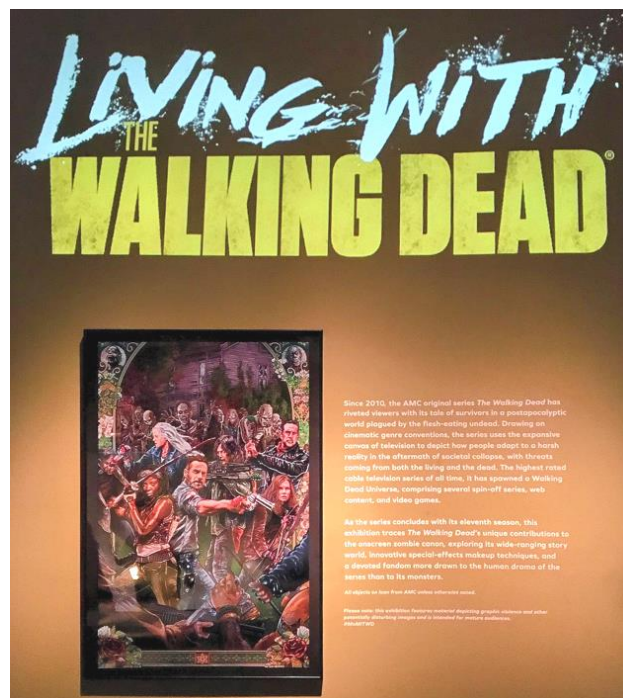
And in addition to all this, *Behind the Screen* is a walk through history. There are more than a thousand items from the museum's permanent collection on display, things like film and television cameras from decades past, costumes, set design models, and even some media tie-in merchandise from long ago. And going all the way back to the very beginning, there's also a viewing station that shows a short featurette

about the French scientist and physiologist Étienne Jules Marey, who in the early 1890s created some of the very earliest moving image productions (it was referred to as ‘chronophotography’ back then). All in all, this exhibition is perhaps the best one in existence anywhere for introducing the layman to the historical background and overall creative processes of how moving image productions are made.

But that’s not what we came to MotMI to see.

Besides the core exhibition, the museum also has room for two additional special interest displays. One of them, *The Jim Henson Exhibition* (which we saw on our previous trip to the museum back in 2020), has been so popular that it’s going to be there indefinitely. That was most certainly worth another visit, with all its puppets, costumes, storyboards, and film/TV clips which guide you through the career of Jim Henson and explore his creative processes. But we didn’t linger there. Instead, we spent some quality time with Rick, Daryl, Carol, Maggie, Michonne, Negan, and other post-apocalyptic survivors in MotMI’s other special exhibition, *Living with The Walking Dead*.

Before I go any further I should mention that Nicki and I are big fans of *The Walking Dead* television show. We’ve seen every episode of the original series and also all of the spin-offs. And we’re not nearly the only



entrance to “Living with The Walking Dead” exhibition



(top) simulated gore-covered clothing; (bottom) prosthetic severed heads of Michonne’s pet walkers with their rope cuffs

ones – *TWD* at one point in its run was the third most-watched show on television in the U.S.A., behind only *The Big Bang Theory* and *Sunday Night Football*. So it was a very pleasant surprise during our visit to The Big Apple when we discovered that MotMI (with the support of the AMC cable TV network which had aired the series) had organized a large retrospective about *TWD* which, according to the museum’s website, “addresses the origins, production, fandom, and impact” of the show.

There was far more to see than I had expected, and a lot of it takes you right down into the guts of the show. Very literally so – MotMI has posted a disclaimer on its website that reads: “Please note: this exhibition features material depicting graphic violence and other potentially disturbing images and is intended for mature audiences.” Among the items on display are clothes covered with zombie blood and innards (make that *seemingly* covered, even though it sure looked real to me). *TWD* is not shy about showing violence that occurs during the

zombie apocalypse, and MotMI was not shy about including depictions of it on video screens that were spread around the exhibition. Some of the objects shown in those video clips were on display, one example being Negan's barbed wire-wrapped baseball bat 'Lucille' which he had used in numerous acts of lethal brutality. There was an explanatory placard for the prop: "*The rubber bat on display is rigged with a cavity for a packet of fake blood, which explodes upon contact creating a vivid, gruesome effect.*"

No surprise that the practical special effects for the show are high-end.



'Lucille' and a (prosthetic) head that had been attacked by it

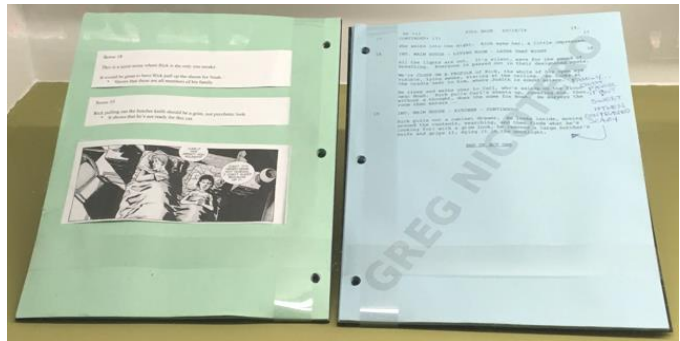


costumes of some of the main characters

detail, that advances the overall story arc.

Hey, I came away really impressed! If I were an aspiring film student I'd consider the three exhibitions of MotMI as master classes that would help me begin a career. As for me, I've always been fascinated by the movie-making process, so much so that I'm usually an avid viewer of any TV series or special which illuminates the creative process. This was as much up-close-and-personal to such behind-the-scenes activity as I've ever been. For anybody not already involved in the motion picture industry, this is surely the next best thing.

But there was far more to the exhibition than just blood splatter, and that included cinematic and other popular culture forerunners. As stated by the museum's website: "*Living with The Walking Dead explores the cinematic and literary antecedents of the series.*" There were homages to other zombie movies including *Night of the Living Dead*, but what initially caught my attention was in the hallway leading into the exhibition – mounted on the wall was an array of every issue of Robert Kirkman's *TWD* comic book series that the TV series was based on. As for what individual episodes of *TWD* were based on, there were some illuminating displays on that as well. Concept art, costumes galore, storyboards, animatronic zombie body parts, and annotated drafts of shooting scripts all provided an interconnected narrative on how the broad concept for an episode of the show becomes, in the end, a polished production, filled with painstaking



annotated script for Episode 12 of Season 5

Four Days, Five Shows (part two)

And speaking of ‘the next best thing’, we decided that since we couldn’t get tickets to *Phantom of the Opera* the next best thing would be *Chicago*. We’d seen the show before, but that had been 14 years earlier. It was still right where we’d left it, at the Ambassador Theatre, but in this brave new world of 2023 the seats we ended up with were probably not quite as good as the ones we’d had back in 2009.

Chicago is also set in the 1920s, but unlike *Some Like It Hot* there are no extended dance sequences. What dance there is had been choreographed by the great Bob Fosse, with hats tilted down over one eye, spread fingers, shoulder and hip rolls, and general overall slinkiness. So much so that in my opinion, *Chicago* is the Fossiest of all Fosse musicals. The plot centers around two main characters, Roxie Hart and Velma Kelly, whose upcoming murder trials were being handled by a superstar defense attorney, Billy Flynn. And in the end, it’s all about celebrity rather than guilt or innocence. Before Roxy’s incarceration, Velma had been a media darling – the woman who in a rage had killed her husband and sister after finding them *in flagrante delicto*. But now it was Roxy’s turn – shooting a lover and then failing to convince her husband to take the blame was juicy stuff that the press gleefully devoured. And also newspaper readers who would become the jurors – the greater the celebrity the closer to certainty the odds for acquittal, and after that the better the opportunity to financially leverage that fame.



typical Fosse choreography

There are many, many good songs in the musical, starting off with one of the most famous: “All That Jazz”. And it’s presented with a somewhat sparse production design which puts the orchestra right there on stage and relies on the audience’s imaginations to fill in all the details. It was proof positive that a musical doesn’t necessarily need a lush staging to succeed. To us, *Chicago* was like an old friend – it was the very first Broadway show we’d seen in our continuing series of January trips to New York. And we like it so much that I’m pretty sure we’ll see it again someday.

Another musical we saw during the trip went back in history even further than *Some Like It Hot* and *Chicago*. It was *1776*, and I’d been wanting for more than 30 years to attend a good staging of it. The only previous time that Nicki and I had seen it was way back when we were living in Chattanooga – we’d gone to an amateur dinner theatre production that was unfortunately mostly lacking in talent.

To me, *1776* is out-of-the-ordinary because it’s as much a play as it is a musical. It’s set almost entirely at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, during the weeks leading up to the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and the show does a good and mostly accurate job of walking us through all the machinations and haggling amongst Continental Congress delegates in their quest to come up with a text for the Declaration that would receive unanimous approval. Often there are long stretches of drama between the songs, with fewer songs than what would probably be expected in a standard 2½ hour musical. It won the Tony Award for Best Musical during its original run on Broadway, in 1969, but back then the cast was comprised entirely of Caucasian actors, all except two of them men. This staging was *a lot* different.

The main character in the show, John Adams, was played by a woman. As was Thomas Jefferson. As was Ben Franklin. In fact, the entire cast was non-male (as well as pan-racial), made up of actors who identify as female, trans, and non-binary. So-called colorblind productions have become fairly common on Broadway (and we've seen several of them) but this is the first one we've ever attended that was fully gender-blind. It took a bit of getting used to but after a while, as I became fixated on the plot, I mostly stopped noticing. I've read that the production was staged in this manner for a reason. The Director of the show has stated that: "*I want the audience to hold that dual reality, of what the founders were, but also a company of actors ... who never would have been allowed inside Independence Hall.*" It was a courageous and somewhat daring approach, and I think it worked.

That said, *1776* is not one of my favorite Broadway musicals. But I did like this production, and it succeeded in mostly clearing my memory of that awful amateur version, back in the 1980s, which had almost poisoned me on it forever. I'm glad I saw it.

Back in Time

1776 took us back more than 200 years but our other museum visit, on our last day in town, took us back much, much further. After we'd checked the websites of various museums in the city to see what special exhibitions were currently on display we decided to go to The Metropolitan Museum to see the one titled *Chroma: Ancient Sculpture in Color*. Sculptures from ancient Greek and Roman times were actually very colorful even if those that still exist do not really show it. So, several years ago, two learned art historians from Germany were commissioned to recreate several already-existing sculptures from those times (some of them currently on display at The Met and some at other museums) to show how they probably originally appeared. A team led by the two researchers used techniques such as 3D imaging and spectroscopic analysis as well as a lot of old-fashioned historical research to do this, and the results were spectacular.

It turned out there was a lot to see. The Met is huge – it's the largest museum in the western hemisphere. The Greek and Roman Art wing takes up close to 20% of the museum's available space and interspaced at various places in that expansive collection were the recreated sculptures. But it wasn't a needle-in-haystack exercise to find them because the colors made the recreations really stand out in what was largely a monochromatic expanse. The one I liked the best was the one the museum had used in its promotional material for the exhibition – a sphinx whose original counterpart dates back to about 500 BCE. The museum's website states that had been the grave marker for a young girl and boy who had lived in ancient Greece. Other recreated sculptures mirror originals from ancient Roman and Egyptian times.



polychromatic recreation of a sphinx
(original sits atop column in background)

There was a lot more to see at The Met than we had time for, of course. It would have taken a couple of days, probably, to properly view everything. It took us close to a couple of hours just

to hurriedly peruse through the Greek and Roman Art area, there was so much to see and marvel at. For instance, I'm an admirer of detailed mosaics and The Met has a really nice one – an entire Roman floor that dates back to about the time of Emperor Hadrian. The level of craftsmanship was off the chart.

We also had time to take in the Modern and Contemporary Art wing of the museum. It didn't take as much time to see as the Greek and Roman Art wing because doesn't it occupy nearly as much space – for those wanting to see great modern

art while they're in New York, most of the best stuff is at MoMA. Still, there are some really nice works by famous artists, including paintings by Henri Matisse, Mark Rothko, Joan Miró, Thomas Hart Benton, Pablo Picasso, Georgia O'Keeffe, Gertrude Stein, Diego Rivera, Edward Hopper, Jasper Johns, and Vincent Van Gogh. And also two large oils by Salvador Dalí, which I found greatly in contrast to his much, much smaller painting *The Persistence of Memory* over at MoMA. I liked them so much that I'm probably going to write an essay about Señor Dalí and some of his artwork. From a very personal point of view.



Nicki at The Met with Dalí's *Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercubus)*

The Met doesn't exactly require you to exit through the gift shop, but it's big enough and at a central enough location within the museum that you really can't miss it. Nicki and I do not usually buy a lot of museum memorabilia but over the years we've amassed quite a large collection of refrigerator magnets from cities and museums we've been to. So we were a little bit disappointed that we didn't find one for The Met that we liked. Nevertheless, we didn't come away empty-handed – Nicki found a pin of an Egyptian Cat that she really liked. Not quite the same as if it had been a painted sculpture, but it's close.



an exquisite Roman floor mosaic at The Met (cover to a Roman burial sarcophagus in foreground)

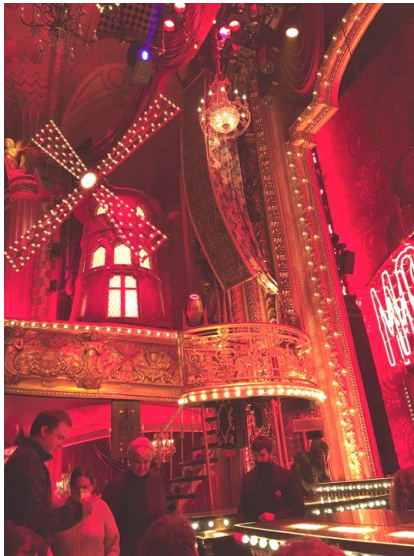
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Nicki's souvenir from The Met

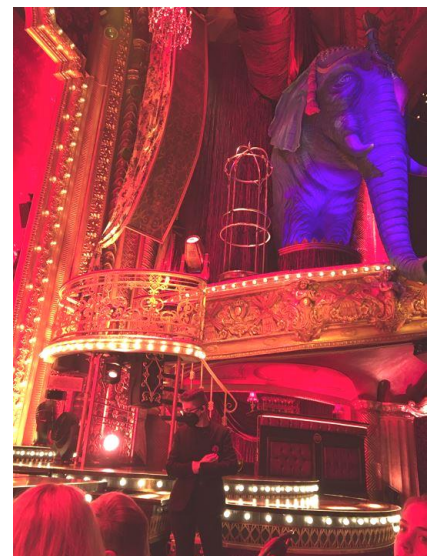
Four Days, Five Shows (part three)

The musical that we saw on our final evening in town was the one that provided the most sensory overload – by a lot! It was *Moulin Rouge!*, winner of ten Tony Awards back in 2021,



the *Moulin Rouge!* set, stage right

including Best Musical. The seats we'd gotten at TKTS – second row center – made the show, in effect, not just a performance-in-the-round but a performance-in-the-sphere. The set extended beyond the stage area, to both the left and right of us, with actors and actresses speaking their lines of dialog overlooking the corners of the stage from where the mezzanine-level box seats normally would be. And every once in a while, one of the actresses would descend



the *Moulin Rouge!* set, stage left

from above on a swing trapeze, stopping her descent just a few feet away from us. But that wasn't really what made *Moulin Rouge!* so over-the-top.

No, what made the show such an assault on our senses was the relentlessness of its music. *Very* loud music. Maybe not quite turned up to eleven, but close. For a while I had wads of tissue stuffed into my ears to dampen it a bit, but I ended up removing them because it also muffled the voices for the actors and actresses. When we'd perused through the show's *Playbill* prior to the first act, Nicki had noticed that there was no listing of the songs. This was because there were so many of them. *Moulin Rouge!* is a so-called 'jukebox musical', repurposing already-existing popular songs. There have been quite a few Broadway musicals of this kind – *Mamma Mia* and *Jersey Boys*, for example – but usually they feature the music of just one person or group. In contrast, *Moulin Rouge!* had an incredibly diverse 'playlist', everything from Elton John's "Your Song" to the Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil"; from The Police's "Roxanne" to Joe Cocker's "Up Where We Belong"; from Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You" to The Commodores' "Brick House"; from... well, you get the idea. In all there were more than 50 different songs, often sung in mash-ups of two or more at a time. I came away with great admiration for the cast of the show, who had to learn and sing all that music.

You might think from all this that I hated the show, but I didn't. I liked it and I'm glad I got to see it. The plot, set at about the beginning of the 20th century, centers around a young composer who falls in love with the star actress of the Moulin Rouge cabaret in Paris. His rival for her affection is a rich nobleman who has invested heavily in the cabaret to keep it afloat. There's angst and even some tragedy, but there's lots and lots of spectacle – song and dance galore, colorful costumes, a terrific stage design, and even an emcee who is as memorable as the one in *Cabaret*. And, in the end, it was all that sheer spectacle that finally won me over. All in all, *Moulin Rouge!* certainly deserved all the accolades and awards it's received. But as demanding as it was on the senses, I'm not sure if I'll ever be up to seeing it again.

Epilog: What if?

We couldn't end our four day 'Escape to New York' without seeing something that is unique to Times Square – the Midnight Moment. It's been described as “the world's largest, longest-running digital art exhibition, synchronized on over 90 electronic billboards throughout Times Square”. Midnight Moment videos are always three minutes in length and provide aspiring film-makers the opportunity to get some notice and acclaim. The truly mesmerizing one that ran in January was *Long Low Line* by artist/ animator Danielle Dean and had this description: “*Inspired by archival auto advertisements, Dean's sweeping animated watercolor landscapes journey through sun-kissed mountain ranges and empty architectural ruins.*” But I dunno about that... to me it seemed more of an 'Escape to the Desert'.



a small part of the Midnight Moment on Jan. 6th

The trip home the next day was uneventful, except for a medical emergency of some kind as the train was nearing Philadelphia which caused the Amtrak people to ask for assistance from any medical people who were on board. But other than that, I had plenty of time to think about the previous four days. And also to consider what our 'Escape to New York' might have been like under different circumstances.

For instance, what if tickets to *Phantom* had been available and for a reasonable price? Well, that's an easy one – we would have seen *Phantom* instead of *Chicago*. Kind of an even trade. And if we'd been able to get affordable tickets for *The Music Man*? In that case, we probably wouldn't have gone to *1776*, but then we'd have missed a unique and memorable take on a classic Broadway musical. And if we'd come to New York a week later than we did? Maybe the unusually large crowds in Times Square would have at least somewhat abated, but by then both *Into the Woods* and *1776* would have closed. And we *still* most likely wouldn't have been able to get tix for *Phantom* and *The Music Man*.

By the time the train had reached our stop at BWI Airport, I'd decided: the hell with the what-ifs. In the end, things worked out pretty well and it was a good trip. Next year's will be too. ☀

Afterword:

Well, the hotel rates in Times Square haven't come down a lot over the past year so I elected to cash in a bucketful of Marriott points for our upcoming trip. It's less than a month from now as I write this and it'll be a fine way to conclude the Holiday Season.

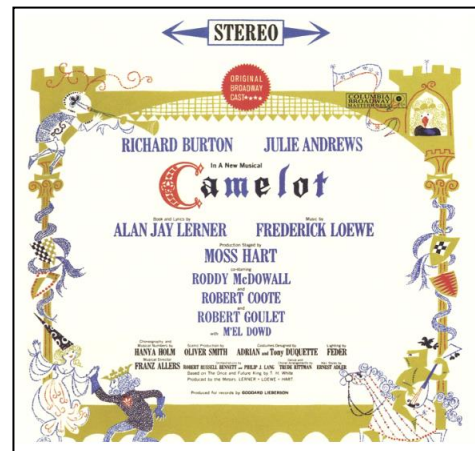
Nicki and I have been enjoying Broadway shows since our first mini-vacation to New York back in 2008. But as you will read next, my infatuation with musicals goes back a lot further than that. Even though I'd never been to a Broadway theatre in person until 2008, I had (in a way) taken in Broadway productions decades prior to that. And lots more since then. It wasn't until I started to write about them when I realized just how many.

Gotta Sing, Gotta Dance

I can't remember for sure when I first became a fan of Broadway musicals but I know it was in the 1960s. Back then I was growing up in the small village of Chaumont, NY, on the eastern shore of Lake Ontario. My older sister had several LPs of original cast Broadway shows and she played them very often. Sometimes loudly. My bedroom was directly adjacent to hers, sharing a common wall, so it often turned out that when she was listening to Broadway music, so was I.

And, I decided early on, it was really *good* music! Even the bad singers such as Richard Burton, who mostly orated his way through songs, had a certain charm that made me wish that I could *see* these musicals instead of just listening to them.

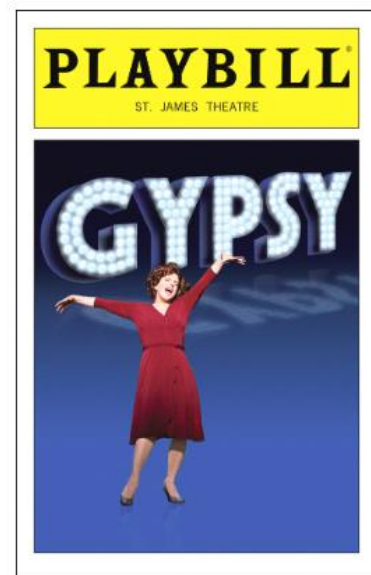
But that was not to be, not for several years. My parents weren't well off, to say the least, and even if they had been, there were no professional theatre companies anywhere near where we lived. It wasn't until my senior year in college that I finally got to experience an Actors Equity-level performance of a renowned Broadway musical.



It was *Jesus Christ Superstar*. A touring company was on the university circuit and on a cold winter's evening in early 1971 it did a single performance in the gymnasium of the college I was attending. I remember that it was pretty bare bones – all the actors were costumed but there were hardly any production values. But that hadn't mattered to me – my imagination had filled in what the staging had lacked. And best of all, I'd come away entertained. It had been a really good show.

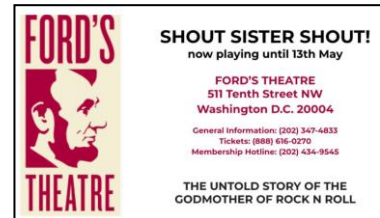
In case you're wondering, Nicki was also there. But it was before she'd met me, so while she had found a relatively comfortable seat on the gymnasium's bleachers I was sitting on my storm coat on the floor. Correction: *we* were sitting. I'd had a date that night but I actually don't remember too much about it, which I guess is an indication of how good the show was in comparison to the rest of my evening.

It would be many years before I saw another professionally-staged musical. There was some community theatre stuff that Nicki and I went to in the interim but it ranged from "not professional quality but somewhat close" all the way down to "you've got to be kidding me". It wasn't until the summer of 2008 when we finally saw the inside of an actual Broadway theatre. It was the storied St. James, which has been staging award-winning shows since 20 years before I was born. The one we saw was *Gypsy*, which had three Tony Award-winning performers in the cast including the great Patti Lupone. As you'd expect, it was a terrific show. And it set a pretty high bar for comparison to other Broadway musicals we've seen since then.



And there have been a lot of them – I’ve lost track of exactly how many. They’ve ranged from the world famous (*Wicked* and *Chicago*) to the relatively obscure (*After Midnight* and *In Transit*); from the lavishly-staged (*Phantom of the Opera* and *Evita*) to the sparse (*Mamma Mia* and *The Fantasticks*); from productions filled with entertaining dance numbers (*On the Town* and *Holiday Inn*) to those which have pretty much no dancing at all (*Miss Saigon* and *1776*); from revivals of decades-old classics (*South Pacific* and *Fiddler on the Roof*) to modern-day originals (*A Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder* and *The Band’s Visit*); from the best-of-the-best (*Anything Goes*, *Hadestown*, and *Some Like It Hot*) to the “we made a big mistake in seeing this” (*West Side Story*, because of the way it was staged).

Nicki and I have seen professional quality productions in other places besides New York, of course. The Washington metro area has a thriving theatre scene and we’ve been to many musicals in the city and its Maryland suburbs. Most often we go the regional theater over in Olney, but we’ve also seen musicals down in D.C. at the Shakespeare Theatre, the National Theatre, and the Kennedy Center. And there’s also one other venue where musical theatre productions are staged: the historic Ford’s Theatre. We were there just recently to see the new musical *Shout Sister Shout!*, about the life of the great singer and songwriter Sister Rosetta Tharpe, which seems destined for Broadway sometime soon. Great show, great music.



I’d like to think that what I know about musical theatre has been greatly enhanced over the years. But to use a baseball analogy, I’m also well aware that I’m still in the minor leagues. Back in 2012, I attempted to show off what I’d thought was burgeoning knowledge of Broadway musicals by participating in a panel discussion about them at the Chicago Worldcon. It was focused on the use of fantasy-related themes in musical theatre, and I had imagined that I might have something to add. But I’d found that what I knew paled in comparison to the other panelists. They’d all had considerable expertise in the topic; one of them had even written *The Broadway Musical Quiz Book*. In the end I did the best I could not to embarrass myself, which had largely consisted of letting the other panelists do almost all of the talking. It was very humbling.

Nicki and I are very much looking forward to our next trip to New York. On our most recent visit there, back in January, we closed the circle by paying another visit to the St. James. *Into the Woods* was in the final week of its run, and it turned to be as good and entertaining a production as *Gypsy* had been. The next production at the St. James is the new musical *New York, New York* which is based on the 1977 Martin Scorsese movie. It opened this spring and with any luck it will still be there in January. And we will be, too. ☀

Afterword:

As I mentioned, Nicki and I have made hotel reservations for our next Big Apple trip (it’ll be the week immediately after the New Year) but we won’t know what shows we’ll be seeing until we get there and find out what tickets are available (and for what price). But as for seeing *New York, New York*, it’s not gonna happen. The show was evidently not the success it was hoped to be, because it closed back at the end of July.

Next is a remembrance of a good friend who liked Broadway musicals even more than me. And after nearly four years I think I’m still in denial about his passing.

The Man We All Called ‘Bwana’

It was back in 2001 that my late friend Mike Resnick, in a fanzine article about what he’d include in a personal time capsule, wrote something that came across as perhaps overly pessimistic. And as it turned out, sadly prophetic: *“My fandom is dying. It’s been dying for years. It’ll be decades more before the last remnants are gone, and I have every hope and expectation that it will outlive me.”*

At the time when Mike wrote that, he was nearly four decades into what had been a very successful career as a professional writer. But he was also very much a science fiction fan, having discovered fandom in 1962 in the pages of a fanzine. And it was his perception, back in 2001, that his fanzine-centric fandom was in the midst of what had seemed a steep decline. Which had brought on that bit of pessimism.

I can’t remember for sure when Nicki and I first met Mike – it was probably about the time of the 1988 Worldcon – but I do know when we became friends. It was in 1994, during that year’s Worldcon. We had an enjoyable long conversation with him in the Cincinnati Fantasy Group’s hospitality suite, where Mike had settled in after having missed out on winning a Hugo Award due to a controversial decision by the award administrators. He told us that he had read a few issues of our fanzine, *Mimosa*, and out of the blue offered to write us an article for the next one. Which we gratefully accepted. It turned out to be one of the best pieces of non-fiction he ever wrote: “Roots and a Few Vines”, where he described in detail his experiences at the 1963 Worldcon in Washington, D.C. which had made him a fan for life and had set him on the road to becoming a science fiction writer.



That article got so much positive reader response that Mike ended up writing eight more articles for *Mimosa*, including a series of four first person remembrances of other Worldcons he had attended. And he attended a lot of them. Mike ostensibly used Worldcons as opportunities to meet with publishers about book contracts and the like, but he was actually there as a fan. From the time we became friends until just a few years ago when health considerations started to affect his ability to make long trips, he was a constant presence at nearly every Worldcon. His most famous fiction series, one which brought him awards and award nominations aplenty, was Afrocentric in theme (one of Mike’s favorite travel destinations was Kenya) and many of his friends, us included, started to affectionately refer to him as ‘Bwana’. I remember that he once tried to convince Nicki and me to come along with him on one of his Africa trips but by that point in our lives we were not so much into that kind of an adventure. Instead, we preferred a more vicarious experience by listening to him talk at conventions about his travels.

One of the shorter trips he took was back to his original home city of Chicago. Near the end of the “Roots and a Few Vines” article, Mike had written that: *“I’ve won some awards, and I’ve paid some dues, and I don’t think it’s totally unrealistic to assume that sometime before I die I will be the Guest of Honor at a Worldcon.”* It was a much-deserved honor that finally came to pass in 2012, in Chicago, and I was happy to be on a panel with him about a joint interest of ours – Broadway musicals. But it turned out that my knowledge on the topic was not even close to

what Mike and the other panelists displayed so I spent most of the hour just reveling in the experience while trying not to embarrass myself. After that we often compared notes about musicals we'd seen and liked (and sometimes disliked). And that, in a way, was the inspiration for Mike's final fanzine article – a musical theater survey that was published in 2019 in the fanzine *Challenger*. In it, he and eight other Broadway enthusiasts (me included) listed our top twelve favorite musicals. Which, I'm sure, would have resulted in many more enjoyable hours of discussion on that topic with him.



Mike and me, with other panelists, on the Broadway musicals panel

Instead, I've spent some time trying to organize my thoughts on how I would remember my friend Mike. Cancer is a cold, ruthless killer, and his last days from what I've read are not the way I'd want to go out. But my memories of him, indeed memories of him by all of his friends, live on. Of all the pleasant times, and there were many. I'll end this remembrance by going back to the time capsule article that Mike wrote for *Mimosa*. In it he listed all the things related to fandom he possessed that he would preserve in stasis, if he could, for fans of the year 2100 to discover. And also a contextual note for all those future fans:

- - - -

Dear Citizen of 2100:

I hope you are living in the Utopia we envisioned when we were kids first discovering science fiction. I am sure you have experienced technological and medical breakthroughs that are all but inconceivable to me.

But I have experienced something that is probably inconceivable to you, at least until you spend a little time studying the contents of this capsule.

I wish I could see the wonders you daily experience. But you know something? As badly as I want to see the future, to see what we've accomplished in the next century, I wouldn't trade places with you if it meant never having experienced the fandom that this capsule will introduce you to.

Enjoy. I certainly did.

- - - -

I feel grateful to have been part of Mike's fandom. And I feel regret for all those future fans of the year 2100 who won't have the chance to meet Mike in person. But they can still meet him through his fiction and descriptions of his fandom, and that ought to make him larger than life for them. He already is for me. ☀

Afterword:

To me, the fandom I know is maybe a bit like an ornate tapestry – filled with stories about events and people that become almost legendary over the years and decades. And every time one of those people passes it creates a tear in that fabric. Back at the end of 2022 I wrote an essay about someone whose passing, three decades earlier, had created a large hole in my personal fannish tapestry. Here it is again.

Remembering Roger Weddall

It's been 30 years since the passing of my friend Roger Weddall. I doubt very many of you reading this had ever met him and I wouldn't be surprised, actually, if most of you haven't even heard of him. Thirty years is a long time and the demographics of fandom has changed a lot. So let me tell you a little bit about him.

To begin with, Roger was very much an actifan during the 1980s and very early 1990s. He was a member of the Melbourne Science Fiction Club but his fan activities extended far beyond the borders of Australia. Back then the Internet was not the prime means, as it is today, for fans separated by large distances to interact with each other. Instead, we communicated with each other mostly by letters and through fanzines which were distributed the old-school way – by surface mail. And that's how I met him.

Back then, my wife Nicki and I were publishing a general interest fanzine, *Mimosa*, and had been sending it out as trade for other fanzines we'd receive in the mail. One of them was the MSFC fanzine *Thyme*, of which Roger was co-editor. And it was a very pleasant surprise for us to receive a long letter from him, in the first part of 1987, that commented favorably on our second issue. A lot of correspondence followed and a burgeoning friendship developed.

It wasn't until 1992 that Nicki and I finally got to meet him in person. That year Roger had been elected the representative of the Down Under Fan Fund (DUFF) and came to the United States for the Worldcon, Magicon, which was held in Orlando, Florida. But the weekend before that he attended a small fan get-together, the Jophan Family Reunion, in Birmingham, Alabama. And it was there we learned that he was seriously ill with lymphoma. He'd intended to include a stop in Maryland to stay with us as part of his DUFF trip but the disease had caused him to change his plans so that he could return to Australia immediately after the Worldcon to continue his chemotherapy treatments.

Roger had assured us that the disease was controllable – had been controlled, in fact – and that he fully intended to return to North America in 1993 to continue his DUFF excursion. But that turned out to be far too optimistic. When we said good-bye to each other at the conclusion of Magicon, Nicki and I had been hopeful that we'd see him again but fearful that we wouldn't. And a very few months later, on the night of December 3rd, we received the long-distance telephone call we were dreading would happen, the news of Roger's death.

Nicki and I were fortunate that in the relatively short time we knew Roger we managed to accumulate many memories of and about him that we've continued to treasure: Roger had an unpredictable side where he would do memorable things from out of the blue from time to time, like his 'telephone call from the future' to us one New Year's Eve (he was on the other side of the International Date Line, where the new year had already arrived). We also knew Roger as someone who would gladly go out of his way to do something for you that he knew you wanted; several times we'd received letters from him where the envelope had been almost completely covered with different postage stamps – all because he knew that Nicki (at that time) collected Australian postage stamps.



Roger at the
Jophan Family Reunion

One other thing about Roger was his hyperactiveness during the Jophan Family Reunion and at Magicon the following week. From what I observed, hardly anybody had the stamina to keep up with him. And that's the way I remember him most – full of life and enthusiasm. Roger was that special kind of person who could brighten up your day whenever he wrote or called and the world has been a less friendly place without him. To say that I've been missing him these past three decades is a huge understatement.

I'll end this remembrance by describing something that happened during the Jophan Family Reunion, a little anecdote that really shows off Roger's personality. Roger had been hosted by our mutual friend Charlotte Proctor during his stay in Birmingham and on the final evening of the convention Nicki and me, Roger, and Charlotte went out to dinner at a shopping mall restaurant. Afterwards, just as we were all back in her car and ready to leave, Charlotte suddenly remembered that she'd meant to bring the baked potato from her meal back home for her husband Jerry to eat later. She'd been ready to just forget the whole thing, but Roger said, "Wait! I'll get it for you!" Charlotte drove to the restaurant entrance and, as the three of us hummed the theme music from *Mission: Impossible*, Roger raced into the side entrance of the restaurant and then, a moment later, came running back out again triumphantly holding up the foil-wrapped potato. He threw himself into the car and we sped off. It was all done so slickly that the restaurant staff didn't even realize that they had been victimized by The Great Potato Caper. It was truly a moment that fan historians of the future will marvel at.

I'm sorry that most of you reading this never got a chance to meet Roger Weddall. I know you would have liked him. ☀

Afterword:

Several fans commented on my essay about Roger, including two people who had also met him in person. **Tom Becker** wrote:

I met Roger at MagiCon, and wow. He was a fantastic DUFF delegate, was one of the best fan fund auctioneers ever, and made friends with everyone. His death was a great loss. I still miss him. Thank you for sharing your memories of him.

and **Frances Hughes** added:

I still miss Roger too, such a gentle, clever and funny man. Some of my best memories and adventures in the mid 80's were facilitated by him and usually involved being somewhere we were not supposed to be, in the dark, but with snacks (e.g. climbing a pyramid, not just any pyramid, the Great Pyramid). I am sorry for the loss of your friend and so sad that Roger had to leave us so young.

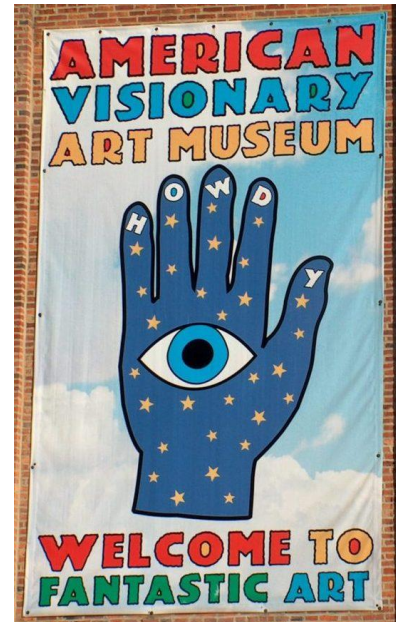
I'd like to think that, in a way, preserving memories like this gives a departed friend a degree of immortality. As the award-winning author Justin Cronin tells it, "*As long as we remember a person, they're not really gone. Their thoughts, their feelings, their memories, they become a part of us.*" And also, as I wrote in my essay about Mike Resnick, as years pass they become larger than life. I think that's probably true about Roger as well.

But back to the Holiday Season. For our upcoming early January trip to New York, we're looking forward to another couple of museum visits. But that's obviously not the only place where great museums are located. As you'll read next, there's a really good one just a short drive from us, up in Baltimore.

The Museum of Earthly Delights

As I mentioned in a previous essay, it shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone who knows me for me to say that I really like museums. Art museums, history museums, science museums, cultural museums, sports museums, you name it. They're all good. Where I live we're blessed with the Smithsonian which has 16 museums and galleries in the Washington metro area, ten of them conveniently located adjacent to the National Mall and several others near Metrorail stops. And besides these there are dozens of others in the city that are not affiliated with the Smithsonian.

But this essay is not about any of those. Just up the road, Baltimore has its own treasure trove of museums and one of them, the American Visionary Art Museum, gets my vote as the region's most extraordinary. It's been described by CNN as "one of the most fantastic museums anywhere in America" and that seems pretty accurate to me. Visiting it is like being immersed in a Hieronymus Bosch painting – it's the Museum of Earthly Delights.



Unlike the famous Bosch triptych there is normally little in the way heavenly or hellish imagery to be found at AVAM. But there's no lack of unusual and at times surreal things to see that are truly captivating. And exhibitions hosted by the museum are always varied and eclectic. Three past examples: *The Great Mystery Show*, described as "one part lively fun house, two parts cosmic dream lab", explored the human need to know and it featured works and creative investigations of visionary artists (one of them Edward Gorey), research scientists, astronauts, mystics, and philosophers. *All Things Round: Galaxies, Eyeballs & Karma*, billed as "a call to awareness of the circular and voluptuous nature of life", was a multimedia extravaganza which included things like spherical sculptures by vision-impaired artists, mandelas, micro dot sock-thread embroideries, and otherworldly visions depicted by indigenous Huichol yarn art. And *Human, Soul & Machine: The Coming Singularity!* was an attempt by the museum to promote "an honest contemplation of the future of warfare, personal privacy, and transhumanism (the very real effort to download soul, intellect, and human memory into a machine that will not die or grow old)" and was described as "a communal look forward to where much of the Sci-Fi imaginings of the past are now swiftly becoming commonplace reality" via works that were "a hot-wired blend of art, science, humor, caution and hope".

Needless to say, Nicki and I have been regular visitors to AVAM. Partly because of the pandemic it had been a couple of years since we'd last been there and we were pleased to discover there were three new so-called 'outsider art' exhibitions on display. One of them was a retrospective of multimedia artist **Judith Ann Scott** (1943-2005) titled *The Secret Within*. Judith was a truly remarkable person. She was a Down Syndrome baby and from birth was deaf and mostly uncommunicative. This had led her parents to institutionalize her when she was age 7 and she spent her next 36 years as a ward of the State of Ohio. In 1986, Judith's twin sister Joyce, who had not been afflicted with Down Syndrome, got custody of her after an extended

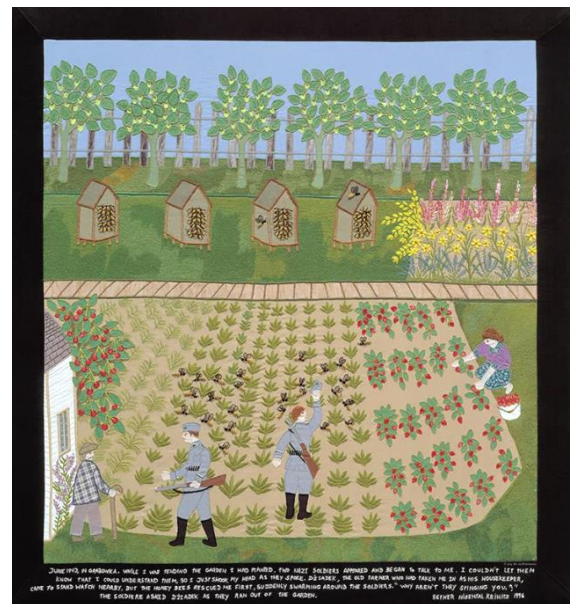
legal process and brought her to northern California where she found nurturing surroundings in a boarding home which provided the care she needed. Joyce also enrolled Judith in the Creative Art Center in Oakland (an art center for people with physical and developmental disabilities) where she discovered her talent as a fiber artist. Judith incorporated various found (and sometimes pilfered) objects such as keys and magazines as cores to be enveloped by yarn and other materials. What resulted were new shapes and forms, many of them vaguely organic and cocoon-like in appearance. And in doing so, she gained national and international acclaim – her works have been on display at the Brooklyn Museum, the National Gallery in D.C., the American Folk Art Museum in New York, and now at AVAM.



Nicki at the Judith Ann Scott exhibition

Some of the objects that were on display reminded me a bit of forms depicted by the great artist John Schoenherr on some of his covers for science fiction books and magazines. Which makes me wonder if Judith had come across old issues of *Analog* in her scavenging for things to incorporate into her 3D art. There was also a short video of Judith at work in the studio and even from that brief clip it was clear that she was driven to create and had realized it was her purpose in life. Would that we all could be so fortunate.

Another of the featured exhibitions was titled *Esther and the Dream of One Loving Human Family*. It's not genre-related but it is in its own way extremely compelling – the life story of Holocaust survivor **Esther Niesenthal Krinitz** (1927-2001) as depicted in a series of fabric pictures. The series progresses from bucolic home life in rural Poland to the rounding up of Jews in the village by Nazi soldiers and then to her escape (with her younger sister) into the relative safety of a forest while her parents and other siblings, as well as all other Jews in the village, were rounded up and sent off to a labor camp where they were murdered. She and her sister eventually were taken in by a farmer and his wife in a different village where they were able to survive the war, and she later immigrated to the USA where she created the fabric pictures that told her life story.



The Bees Save Me – Nazi soldiers flee swarming bees instead of interrogating Esther

There was more to the exhibition than just the fabric picture series, as it also included a partial reconstruction of Esther’s pre-war farm home as well as paintings by other artists about more recent genocides. The overall aim was to “juxtapose the power of Esther’s work and story with the experience of other innocent victims of cultural genocides, historic and current” and it certainly did that.

The third featured exhibition was not nearly so powerful in theme but it was just as interesting. It was titled *If You Build It They Will Come: Visionary Artists and Their Environments* and has been described as an attempt to “take visitors on a journey into the spaces of exceptional artists who have built their own dream worlds”. One of them was **Leslie Payne** (1907-1981), who lived in rural Virginia and built several faux but fairly realistic-looking airplanes. And then, with the participation of neighborhood women who played the role of ‘stewardesses’, he ‘flew’



one of Leslie Payne’s home-built aircraft

around the world, all the while recording his adventures in a log book under the byline ‘Airplane Payne’. Another was **Zebedee Armstrong** (1911-1993) from rural Georgia, who believed he’d been visited by an angel who’d warned him of the imminent end of the world and then became obsessed on creating a ‘calculating calendar’ which would predict the exact date. He became so fixated on this that over the final two decades of his life he built somewhere around 600 such calendars, using mostly discarded and reclaimed material, from the size of an ordinary flat wall calendar to a large 3D wardrobe. But my favorite, by far, was **DeVon Smith** (1926-2003), a junk dealer and science



some of Zebedee Armstrong’s many calendars

fiction/horror movie enthusiast from rural Pennsylvania who used some of the scrap metal he had on hand to build what he called *Worlds 1st Family of Robots*. These are not small constructs – most of them appeared to be about 4-5 feet tall. And they all had names: Father Jupiter, Venus, Sis-tar and her brother Sun, and the dog Pluto. Later on, two others joined the family: Saturn and Mars. Even though they’re part of this special exhibition they’ve been ‘residents’ of the museum for many years – I’ve read that Saturn and Mars were ‘married’ at AVAM back in June 2000 and the ceremony was witnessed by dozens of museum attendees.



DeVon Smith’s *Worlds 1st Family of Robots*

DeVon Smith is interesting for more than just his scrap metal sculptures, though. He was known for his wanderlust and his bio describes him as a former Guinness World Record holder for most miles hitchhiked (more than a half million, across four continents). He'd described himself as a 'space traveler' because he'd often deliberately gone to places with out-of-this-world names (Jupiter, Florida for example). And he'd stood out in a crowd because of the outerwear he'd worn – a Doctor Who-like long black jacket with red lapels, pockets, cuffs, and shoulder epaulets, festooned with patches and pins that celebrated some of the places he'd been. This had made him a minor celebrity which had led to appearances on TV shows hosted by Art Linkletter and Groucho Marx. He was present at the museum for the robot wedding ceremony where he offered attendees some sage advice: "Don't sit in a chair. Get out and do it."



DeVon Smith's jacket



the amazing *Tick Tock the Croc*

The permanent collection of AVAM is just as interesting as the special exhibitions. It's spread out over the two buildings occupied by the museum and there's no lack of remarkable things in it, from the sublime (a meditative sculpture garden between the two buildings) to the ridiculous (a display chronicling the history of flatulence humor, appropriately located near one of the restrooms). The museum is home to dozens of kinetic sculptures, ranging from

about the size of a bread toaster all the way up to *Tick Tock the Croc*, a multi-segmented reptile built for the museum's annual kinetic sculpture race and whose movement is provided by six linked-up bicycles. But my favorite is something, in its own way, equally amazing: a 16-foot-long scale model of the RMS *Lusitania* by craftsman **Wayne Cusy** (b. 1961), built entirely from

toothpicks (193,000 of them). It reportedly took him 2½ years to complete, and it's not the only large toothpick sculpture of steamships he's ever done. When Cusy was asked why he was drawn to this kind of use for his available time, he stated that: "It's a challenge. There's a lot of people who like to climb mountains like Mount Everest. ... I choose to build models. It's safer." I'm with him on that.



Wayne Cusy's RMS *Lusitania* toothpick sculpture

As you might expect, AVAM has a gift shop. And like the rest of the museum, it's very diverse. There are things for sale such as gorgeous hand-painted *Día de Los Muertos* ceramic tiles from Mexico and small metal science fictional sculptures from Vietnam. And lots more. (There's even a Zoltar fortune telling machine but that's probably *not* for sale.) The gift shop is so flamboyant and eclectic that it was given a descriptive name: Sideshow. And, from what I could see, it was as much a draw for museum visitors as any of the exhibitions.



small metal sculptures from Vietnam in the gift shop

Nicki and I spent two entertaining hours at AVAM during our most recent visit there in mid-November and we could very easily have stayed a whole lot longer than that. There was quite a lot to see! Just before we departed for home I had a brief conversation with the gift shop manager, who asked me if we'd enjoyed our visit. He seemed impressed when I told him we'd been to AVAM several times, we liked it so much. And he chuckled when I told him that AVAM could be described as 'The Museum of Earthly Delights'. He told me, "I think I'll use that!" Hey, he has my permission! ☀

Afterword:

Turns out there's one of the Smithsonian museums, the American Art Museum, whose collection includes items that would be right at home in AVAM. And one of them is just amazing – James Hampton's *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*, which was assembled over a 14-year period out of scavenged and found items such as burnt-out light bulbs, metal foil, old jelly jars, and cardboard. The museum's description states that the work "embodies a complex fusion of Christianity and African-American spiritual practices overlaying themes of deliverance and freedom" and that it is "both astonishingly splendid and profoundly horrible". In my opinion, it absolutely deserved preservation!



James Hampton's truly amazing *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*

Nicki and I spent an pleasant as well as physically tiring day in D.C on December 5th and a visit to the SAAM was just one stop along the way. We also enjoyed some of the holiday market that was set up adjacent to SAAM and walked through the newest Memorial on the National Mall (which honors President Dwight D. Eisenhower). And then, as you'll read next, we did a whirlwind visit to every famous building and structure in the city – in just 15 minutes!

The Grand Tour

It was a good day to be down in D.C. The weather was fairly nice, as early December goes, and there really wasn't much in the way of crowds to contend with. A huge contrast to what we'd likely experience in late March and early April during Cherry Blossom season.

Nicki and I take a day trip to D.C. every December. Usually to visit a Smithsonian museum, but sometimes to do other stuff. This time it was both. And it was probably *too* much stuff, actually, because it limited the amount of time we had for any one thing. The Smithsonian part of our day was at the American Art Museum, located in the Penn Quarter section of the downtown Washington. We'd reserved a couple of hours for that, but about half of it was spent at the outdoor Holiday Market adjacent to the front entrance of the museum. As a result we only had time to see one exhibition at SAAM – Folk and Self-Taught Art. And it was an eclectic mix – everything from patchwork quilts to bottlecap sculptures to wooden carvings, and a lot more. There was even an area where museum visitors could make their own folk art from various found items that the museum had gathered together. We'll have to come back again soon.



me and Ulysses Davis' *Untitled (Heart/Hart)*
carved wooden wall sculpture



inside the desert biome

After that it was a trip to the desert. Turns out there's one located not far from the U.S. Capitol Building – it's in one of the biome rooms at the United States Botanic Garden. It's not large but there are dozens if not hundreds of succulents, cacti, and other desert flora. One of the purposes of the biome display was to show the adaptability of desert plants from around the world – how they are able to thrive in arid climates when other plants simply cannot. And also how to handle cacti and other thorny plants – there was a small display on that but it really just boiled down to: "Very carefully!"

But what we'd really come to the Botanic Garden to see was its large and intricate model train display. There's one there every Holiday Season, and each has its own unique theme. This year it depicted the relationship between flowering plants and their pollinators and I guess I was surprised to see how many different kinds of them there are: bees, bats, insects, certain species of birds, geckos, and even a ground mammal – the Australasian Pigmy Possum. There is obviously a huge amount of work that goes into assembling the train display each year. It's one of Washington's Holiday Season pleasures.



a small part of the
model train display

There's also another Holiday Season feature of the Botanic Garden, one that's as remarkable as the model train display. And which allows a visitor to take a grand tour of all the famous buildings and structures in Washington in a mere 15 minutes. Nestled amongst a forest of many different kinds of poinsettias is a different kind of collection – smallish reproductions of Washington's landmarks, all of them constructed from plants and plant-based materials. They're all creations of artist and designer Paul Busse and other craftspeople in his Applied Imagination company, who were also responsible for the design and construction of the train display.

The centerpiece is the U.S. Capitol building, which took more than 600 hours to complete. It measures several feet in both length and height, and it



Applied Imagination's model of the U.S. Capitol



Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress

was constructed using willow sticks, sycamore leaves, acorns, and who-knows-what-else. It's truly sublime.

But all the other scale models were just as good – the Lincoln Memorial, the Smithsonian Castle, the Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress, the Washington Monument, the Supreme Court, the White House, and more. They're all pretty incredible for the amount of exquisite detail put into each model.

I've read that Applied Imagination has created similar famous architecture

reproductions for other cities (most notably New York, where they're on display in its Botanic Garden over the Holiday Season) and maybe someday Nicki and I will get to see some of those as well. I'm pretty sure it will be almost as good as seeing the real thing. ☀

Afterword:

For the last essay in this issue I'm going much closer to home. Very close, in fact, because it's mostly set in my own backyard. Every year I usually spend lots of hours cleaning up all the fallen leaves from the yard. Until it finally occurred to me that I needed to start looking upwards instead of just down toward the ground.



my meta-photograph of the Lincoln Memorial model

The Tree

Well, it's that time of year again. Leaf season. October is spectacular for all the fall colors and here in Maryland what we get to see is almost as good as in New England. It's something that I always look forward to and it rarely if ever disappoints.

But that's the good news. The other side of the coin is that once the colors peak all those leaves come off the trees. And a large number of them end up on my lawn. It usually means that I pay for all those spectacular colors with a lot of yard work drudgery.

The backyard is much worse than the front in terms of leaf coverage. The chilly breezes at the end of October cause leaves to rain down by the thousands, as if they were Times Square New Year's Eve confetti. If I did nothing at all to remove them they'd completely carpet the backyard – not a good thing because of all the mold and decay that would follow. By spring there'd be a lot of damage to the grass.

Over the years I've tried many things for clearing away all the leaves and what seems to work best is the good old-fashioned snow shovel. Specifically, the type where you use it as a plow to clear off the driveway. Turns out that kind of shovel is equally good at moving fallen leaves! Much, much easier (and quicker) than raking them. The trees that produce most of those leaves reside inside a small section of state-owned parkland that abuts the back yard, so it seemed natural to me that their fallen leaves should rejoin them there. There's a fairly steep slope down to where the parkland begins which means there's a gravity assist for moving the leaves down the hill. Even so, it's laborious and tiring but I've found that even at my fairly advanced age I can snowplow the entirety of the backyard with just a few hours of work.

It eventually dawned on me that most of the leaves back there were produced by one specific kind of tree – the tulip poplar. There's a stand of them down in the parkland and all are quite tall. Which, I found out, is normal – tulip poplars are the tallest broadleaf trees in North America. The tallest of all, according to Wikipedia, is the Fork Ridge Tulip Tree in Great Smoky Mountains National Park which has been measured at more than 190 feet in height. When I read that the first thought that came to mind was: “Hmmm... I wonder how these trees compare to that?”

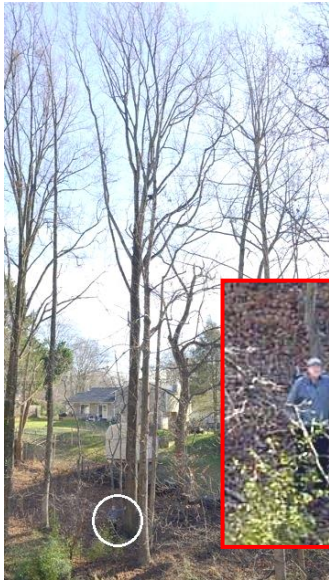
And so began the quest.

I was woefully underprepared for it. At first all I had to go on was seat-of-the-pants reckoning and a little high school geometry. And also some sense-of-wonder. There's one tree down there that's distinctly taller than any of the others, and it's situated at the edge of a small clearing that allowed me a fairly good sightline to both its base and topmost branches. So based on my guesstimate of the straightline distance to the tree from my observation point and another guesstimate of the angles up to the top and down to the base, I came up with a very crude height calculation of between 150 feet and 190 feet for the monster. A bit eye-opening, but not enough to get excited about. At least, not until there was a much a more exact measurement.

But there was no way to get it, at least not by me. Or by any other sane person for that matter. To do that requires an intrepid adventurer to actually climb the tree, all the way up to where the limbs thin out. At that point the arborist lowers a tape measure down to the ground to get the height up to where he/she is, and then extends a long measuring rod up to the very top of the tree's crown. Add the two and you get the overall height.

That was clearly not going to happen, so the next best thing was a precise geometric determination. And to do that I'd need professional-quality equipment such as a laser distance device and a clinometer. Which I did not have and, after blanching at how much they cost, decided I never would. But I knew of people who did.

The Maryland Big Tree Program is the local branch of what used to be called the American Forestry Association. The parent organization is very much conservation-oriented and the Big Tree Program exists, as you might guess, to collect data about large trees of various species. I contacted them by email to see if they'd be interested in checking out the tree, and after some back-and-forth a representative of the organization paid me a visit on the morning of October 24th.



me and the big tree



She'd been very skeptical about my guesstimate of the tree's height and that didn't change after her first look at it. Nevertheless, she was intrigued enough that she brought out all the gizmos that I didn't have for doing the measurement. It only took a half hour or so and in the end her verdict was that the tree was only 120 feet tall – not close to a record and not even tall enough to warrant its inclusion in the organization's online database of big trees.

I guess I was a little deflated after hearing that but as the saying goes, it is what it is. There *was* one thing that had bothered me about the way she'd done her measurement, though – she'd never, as it were, showed her work. Stuff like the baseline distance to the tree and the clinometer angles, she'd kept all that information to herself. The whole process had been, in effect, a black box which had produced an end result and nothing else.

So I decided to see if I could duplicate her result without having all the electronic and optical devices that she'd used. And it turned out that I could.

The day after her visit, I received in the mail a package I'd ordered from Harbor Freight which contained something essential to the process – a 165-foot measuring tape. (The longest one I'd had prior to that was a paltry 12 feet.) This allowed me to determine a precise straightline distance from my observation point to the tree: 113.5 feet. And for the princely sum of \$1.99, I downloaded a clinometer app from the Apple store to my iPhone. With Siri calling out elevation angles to the nearest degree, I found that the angle up to the tree's uppermost branch was 43 degrees and the angle down to the base of the tree was -6 degrees. I'll spare you the math – the overall height calculated to 118 feet.

So in the end, she was right that the tree did not belong in the record books. But it's still a great tree, one that's really impressive to behold. And this experience gives me new appreciation of the Fork Ridge Tulip Tree. That one must truly be a monster! If 'my' tree was that height it would probably seem like the living embodiment of Yggdrasil.

Anyway, I'm counting it all as a positive experience. And also an invigorating one. There's still a lot of leaves to be cleaned up down back but after this I'm no longer gonna consider it drudgery. If anything, I expect it'll be the opposite. Too bad *all* yard work can't be that way. ☀

