YORICK'S SKULL

By

Frank Gagliano

(A Four-Day New York Odyssey:
With Sondheim, Goldoni, Jacques Brel, Odets and Yorick's Skull)

(Part One)

DAY TWO/Monday/12 June, 2006:

—it turns out the skull was real.

It was my second day in New York City. I was attending a run-through and fully performed workshop production of Carlo Goldoni's classic farce, THE SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS. Stuart Vaughan and his wife Anne had written the new version and Stuart was directing it. It was being performed for one night only at The Players Club on Monday, June 12, 2006, at 7PM. My friend Ronald Rand was appearing in it and he had invited me to the event.

I first met Ron at the 2005 Last Frontier Theatre Conference in Valdez, Alaska. There, Ron had performed his solo play, *LET IT BE ART! Harold Clurman's Life of Passion*—a fine piece and an uncanny performance that seemed to channel the essence of the late director, critic and founder of The Group Theatre—and that especially contacted Clurman's passion about theatre and life.

(In the founding days of The O'Neill Theatre Center, I would marvel at how Harold Clurman—when addressing all of us "emerging playwrights" in the sunken garden, under the magnificent beech tree in Waterford, Connecticut—would go from a calm zero to a fiery 60 in seconds; and one feared that Mr. Clurman, when in high gear, would start chewing off the bark of the beech tree, as he attacked the then current

flabbiness of American theatre, and as he challenged us to be "artists" in "*this corrupt commercial world.")*

Where, oh where, and in whom, is that Clurman passion today?

Ronald Rand had Harold Clurman's bark-chewing chops down to a T, as well as Clurman's sensitivity, and a solid overview of The Group Theatre and where it fit into American and world theatre history. The authenticity came from Ron knowing Harold Clurman and from studying with Clurman's wife Stella Adler, the legendary actress and teacher.

Ron Rand is also the editor of the publication, *THE SOUL OF THE AMERICAN ACTOR*. I was in New York, among other things, to be interviewed in *SOUL* for the fall edition.

Between the run-through and evening performance of *THE SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS*, I was invited to share sandwiches and salad with Anne and Stuart Vaughan and the excellent cast in the card room of The Players, where Mark Twain had played cards. Twain, along with Edwin Booth, founded The Players. The building was the home of Edwin Booth, the great American Shakespearean actor and brother of Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth.

This from the program notes on the history of The Players: "Edwin Booth dedicated his much beloved home (transformed by architect Stanford White into a clubhouse) to his fellow Players. Many of Booth's costumes and belongings can be found today on display; and his bedroom on the third floor, where he lived out his last days, remains furnished as it was when he died in 1893 at the age of 59."

Ronald Rand, a current member of The Players, took us on a tour of Booth's apartment on the top floor, overlooking Gramercy Park (a lovely, gated park that contains a statue of Booth) — an apartment furnished with Booth's original furnishings and memorabilia, including Booth's beloved volume of Shakespeare, with Booth's notations in the margins, and

with his original slippers, still under the bed, as they were placed when he died.

And there was also Yorick's skull.

Skull in hand, Ron told us that it was the actual skull of a horse thief who had been hanged. The horse thief had seen Booth perform and willed his skull to Booth, who used it in his performances of *HAMLET*. To me, the skull certainly looked like a prop because it was so polished, but it was the real thing and, I'd like to think, must have helped Booth create what was said to be an outstanding, and hair-raising, grave scene.

At the sandwiches-for-actors interlude, after the run-through, and before the evening performance, Stuart Vaughan gave a lovely and touching speech to the cast. He had been genuinely moved by the rehearsal experience, which apparently had been a joy from beginning to end. From a lifetime of experience, he said how rare it was to have such experiences and that the actors should keep this one locked in their collective theatre memories.

Stuart Vaughan helped found The New York Shakespeare Theatre and The Seattle Rep and The New Orleans Rep and New York's Phoenix Theatre and The New Globe Theatre—as well as being the award-winning director of many plays on Broadway, in the Regional Theatres and throughout the world. I had known of, and had seen, some of his productions, and at one time we were both members of The New Dramatists. But we had never met before. He was happy to have me at the run- through because my laughing seemed to help the actors.

The story (according to a Google plot synopsis) "concerns the complications wrought by Truffaldino, when he gets himself engaged as a servant to two different people at the same time. Not all of the complications are of his own making however. One of his 'masters' is in fact a lady in disguise and the other is her male lover, but Truffaldino does not know this."

Commedia del Arte shenanigans, with the Harlequin character, Truffaldino, scamping his way through a well-constructed text.

Before the run through, tricky bits were rehearsed and cleaned up; one comic sword fighting sequence, especially, had to be rehearsed by the numbers to avoid an accident on the cramped stage. The workshop production had been rehearsed and used many props and some period costumes. The actors spoke well and moved well and, by in large, had the necessary comic timing and — most important in a farce — the ability to be *in* the character and, *while* in character, to step out of the action and directly address their subtext pressures to the audience. But the whole structure falls apart if the actor playing Truffaldino doesn't have the chameleon chops to double-take his way through the roll, set up the events, mime his way through moments, pratfall when necessary, do dumb things (yet have the street smarts to disentangle himself from knotty moments), and somehow, through it all, to be lovable. Steve Campbell was Truffaldino and he had all the talent and technique and charming personality to pull it off and remain the eye of the storm for all the other actors to thunder around.

Stuart Vaughan's direction shaped the whole enterprise and kept things lively, clean, specific; the entrances and exits were accomplished on that small stage with split-second timing; and besides choreographing the actors in THE SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS' commedia gavotte, the director made sure that each actor had an inner life going.

All of the actors were professional and many had come out of the Actor's Studio MFA training program. As I watched the wonderful production I kept thinking of Bobby Lewis. Bobby was one of the original members of the Group Theatre and one of the founders, with Elia Kazan, of the Actor's Studio. He was considered a major acting coach and director and directed BRIGADOON on Broadway and other hit musicals and plays and operas in the '50s and '60s. Bobby always seemed to be railing against Lee Strasberg's emphasis on "sense memory," in actor training, at the expense of so many other technical aspects.

Like speech. Like "styles." I can recall a 3-hour car trip my wife and I and Bobby took from Tallahassee to Sarasota in 1971 (he was being considered for Artistic Director of the Asolo Theatre) and, besides the funny reminiscences (which he later expanded in his excellent memoir, SLINGS AND ARROWS) Bobby regaled us with his passion for finding a way to teach "styles" to American actors. He had hoped Asolo might afford him the opportunity to deal with "the styles problem." That opportunity, alas, fell through. Earlier, Bobby Lewis had joined the Yale Drama School Faculty and hoped Yale would be the place to "style-up" actor training. (For that episode in Bobby's life, read his Yale chapters in SLINGS AND ARROWS—and how that position led to a heart attack). I will always remember Bobby, too, for the mantra that apparently guided him through his life and that runs through SLINGS AND ARROWS: "The bastards won't let you live." I thought of Bobby, because I think he would have applauded how much of the Commedia style these actors, trained in the Actor's Studio method, had absorbed.

About 125 people packed The Players Theatre and laughed their way through THE SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS. The cast, which had rehearsed at half energy during the run through, boosted their energy level and gave memorable performances. I wasn't sure that one of the Truffaldino bits I had seen during the run-through was going to work. It was an extended mime piece in which Truffaldino, famished, is plagued by a buzzing fly, catches it, eats it, goes through stomach contortions and outlandish body gyrations until he expels the fly and lets it fly away. Watching the bit in the run-through, I had felt it went on too long and stopped the action. Well—was I wrong! In performance, the bit zipped along, fit right into the rhythm of the moment and got a big hand!

Whenever I (seldom now) get to New York City these days, I look for these bare-bones theatre events to surprise and, if possible, astonish me. I rarely get them. But this Stuart Vaughan SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS did surprise and astonish me. Besides generally enjoying bare-bones presentations by talented pros (my mind's eye fills in the production values, as I

submerge myself in text and performance), this piece had events hurling at me every five minutes, it seemed; and it occurred to me how starved for "plays of events" I am — and I suspect THE SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS audience was reacting to the fulfilling of that need, as well. The audience, that night, loved it. And I certainly hope this bodes well for a fall Off-Broadway production of this SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS.

After the performance, at the wine and cheese reception in the lobby of The Players, I met two old friends: Director Gene Lasko and actor Bob Lavelle (one always seems to meet old friends in New York, often over the Jarlsberg and Merlot—small town, really). Among the people I had hoped to see on this visit to New York, in fact, were Gene Lasko and his lovely wife Joyce. Gene teaches acting in the Actor's Studio MFA Theatre program. We had met a million years ago at The O'Neill Theatre conference and had hooked up again at The O'Neill two summers ago, when Gene was directing there and I was a playwright's mentor. At The Players, Gene and I made arrangements for me to try to see him and Joyce the following day. Bob Lavalle had appeared in a production of my piece, "DANCING WITH JOY," when the Epic Rep Theatre Company included it in their inaugural New York season of plays in 2003, at the DR2 Theatre. Bob played Jonathan Overview in that production and helped make watching that piece one of the few times I could enjoy sitting still (and not run to the back and pace) during a production of one of my pieces. As I recall, after appearing in "DANCING WITH JOY," Bob went into Larry Gelbart's "SLY FOX" on Broadway.

Just before leaving the party, Ronald Rand and I made plans for him to interview me for THE SOUL OF THE AMERICAN ACTOR before I returned to Pittsburgh. I thanked him for making my day a joy—and for introducing me to Stuart Vaughan and to a cast of first-rate young actors; and reintroducing me to a classic play; and for showing me Yorick's skull. Perhaps Yorick's skull was the turning point in this New York trip and, in some perverse way, was presaging good luck (or vibes). Because the day before—my first day—had been a partial nightmare.

That was the day I lost my wallet in New York.

DAY ONE/Sunday.11 June,2006

It was also the day Continental Airlines misplaced my bag.

I had taken a 6:30AM flight from Pittsburgh to Newark Airport, in order to make an 11AM meeting with a former producer of mine, Simon Saltzman. My bag was not on the carousel in the Newark airport. I placed a tracer on it at Continental Airways customer service. I was told that when the bag showed up, it would be delivered to The Edison Hotel on West 47th street, where I was staying. While I was filling out the forms, an Asian gentleman, also filling out forms, was panicked and pleading with the Continental agent: "I had a heart bypass; my medicine was in that bag! Please, please locate it!" I, at least, only had underwear, socks and changes of shirts in mine, so that my horror scenario would merely involve my sagging ass and bod being covered with days-old duds; his horror scenario could be a fatal heart attack. Awhile later, waiting for the NYC shuttle bus, that same man passed by, happily rolling his luggage along. "They found it," he said. "It was on another carousel." Mine, I discovered later, was in Houston, Texas. In a Red State yet!

It was still early when I got to the Edison, too early for check in. I left the one overnight bag I took on flight with me in the Edison's "hold baggage" room. Then, as I turned to the entrance to the Café Edison — also known as the "Polish Tea Room" — I heard a voice near the desk asking the Clerk for my room number. It was Simon Saltzman.

In the late 1960s Simon had produced my last off-Broadway show: THE CITY SCENE. He had a co-producer on the show (her initials were DK) who never raised the money she said she *had* raised. DK disappeared after THE CITY SCENE closed, and Simon was left paying off the debts. Apparently, DK was never heard from again. I hadn't seen Simon in over thirty years. He came across my name on the internet and contacted me last year.

He had turned reviewer for various New Jersey publications (he has always lived in New Jersey) and covered the New York Theatre scene for his publications. He's good too. In fact, his review of the New York production of Clifford Odets' AWAKE AND SING, made me put that play on my list for this visit. We were both recognizable to each other; an older Simon with a still youthful face and cheery smile and slight build, and an older FG, with a larger hook to his nose and with his thinning hair now in a buzz cut (why pretend?). Over breakfasts of lox and eggs, we reminisced about the days of THE CITY SCENE; and about family, politics, and the state of the theatre. Simon is likeable, sharp, and we generally had a warm time together.

(CITY SCENE trivia: 1969. The Off-Broadway movement seems to have peaked. At least for the experimental, theatre-of-the-absurd phase, which is fast phasing out; and phasing in, a new, New York tier, called "Off-Off Broadway." THE CITY SCENE bridges both phases. On display in THE CITY SCENE, my usual absurd touches, mixed with lean, event-driven rising action. THE CITY SCENE is the overall title for two of my plays: PARADISE GARDENS EAST and CONERICO WAS HERE TO STAY. I'm in my urban violence phase and both plays have violence at their centers. PARADISE GARDENS EAST is a chamber musical that takes place in an urban high rise, where a brother decides to keep his visiting sister prisoner. CONERICO WAS HERE TO STAY takes place on a deserted subway station, where a young man has amnesia and discovers his hat is down on the tracks. PARADISE GARDENS EAST is new to the stage; CONERICO is a revival. It had first been produced by Barr/Wilder/Albee in 1965 and presented as part of a Cherry Lane series that introduced new playwrights to New York. It had received good notices in the New York Times, and from the five —or was it seven at the time? — other New York newspapers, and from the media critics. I was even interviewed on a subway platform for a TV news segment. A heady moment.

For THE CITY SCENE production, PARADISE GARDENS EAST had a score by Mildred Kayden; I wrote the lyrics. What was interesting about that remembrance with Simon at the Polish Tea Room in the Hotel Edison that morning, was that I was

hoping to see the current revival of JACQUE BREL IS ALIVE AND WELL AND LIVING IN PARIS while in New York. At the time of THE CITY SCENE, in 1969, the original production of JACQUE BREL had been playing, and SIMON and DK had hired BREL's General Manager to manage PARADISE GARDENS EAST, and BREL's Musical Arranger to arrange the score for PARADISE GARDENS EAST, and for one of the leading singer/performers of BREL, Ely Stone, to record one of our songs to be used in the show.

Other 1969 CITY SCENE memories flood back:

•Outside The Fortune Theatre, during the intermission between plays, I overhear a woman saying about CONERICO: "I hated it the first time; I hate it now." It's Edith Oliver, critic of The New Yorker.

Not a good sign.

•During CITY SCENE rehearsals, one can always hear DK on the phone in the control room talking to her spiritual advisor about what the celestial vibes are that day, for the success-odds of the show.

•A young Michael Douglas has a role in each show. Shortly before the opening, Michael asks to be let out of his contract. The play SUMMERTREE is being filmed and Michael is wanted to recreate on screen the role he created when the play was first developed at The O'Neill Theatre Center Playwright's Conference. He stays in the show through the opening.

•Raul Julia, Terry Kaiser and Dominick Chianese are also in the cast. For the last performance, I'm told that they all perform while high, from smoking pot.)

After our brunch at the Polish Tea Room, Simon has to get back to New Jersey. He's preparing for a trip with the Outer NY Critics to tour theatres in Canada. We promise to keep in touch.

Somehow our meeting was important to me, above and beyond the warmth of two old warriors from the theatre wars getting together. I was to discover what that importance was two days later, on a bench on Central Park West, opposite the apartment of another old warrior from my past.

I discover that a room at the Edison is still not available. I go across the street to the half price ticket sales windows and buy a ticket for the matinee performance of "SWEENEY TODD: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street."

SWEENEY TODD/lost wallet

"There's a hole in the world
like a great black pit
And it's filled with people
Who are filled with shit
And the vermin of the world
Inhabit it. . ."

I did not see the original Hal Prince production of "SWEENEY TODD: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street." I had, though, seen an excellent production at Carnegie Mellon University, directed by J Ranelli. There was also a concert version I recalled seeing on PBS. And I had heard the original cast album with Len Cariou and Angela Lansbury.

[Sondheim digression: A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC has my favorite Sondheim score, partly because, when I saw the original Broadway production of that piece (at the time, New York's Phoenix Theatre was presenting two of my plays in their Sideshow Series: THE COMMEDIA WORLD OF LAFCADIO BEAU and IN THE VOODOO PARLOUR OF MARIE LAVEAU), and my bitter sweet mood matched the bitter sweet mood of A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC; and because Hal Prince's elegant production had some of Sondheim's most brilliant, dazzling, funny and pain-filled lyrics—*and* beautiful, lilting, romantic, grounded-in-waltzes, music. Most important: it moved me. In fact, A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC has, for me, one of the most moving lyric lines in all musical theatre. The line is from the love sick young

Henrik's lament, as he accompanies himself on a soulful cello, lamenting that no one takes him seriously, but that (they keep telling him) they will — "later." The closing, moving line from his "later" lament is: "Doesn't anything begin?"

For many years I thought that that line spoke to me so profoundly because *I've* always been waiting for *my* life to begin. But last year I taught A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC in my text analysis class and realized that it's the total packaging of the song that contributes to its moving quality. The lyric, of course, renders Henrik's self-pitying, somewhat silly character, *and* his immediate pressures, in quick strokes —especially his sinful, frustrating, lust-longing for his young stepmother; but Jonathan Tunick's brilliant cello orchestration, musically dramatizes Henrik's deeper subtext and brilliantly reveals Henrik's (what I call) "center of pain."]

In the current SWEENEY TODD *all* the actors accompany themselves on instruments. In fact, the actors *are* the orchestra! That's why I wanted to see the current production with Patti LuPone and Michael Cerveris. How the hell did it all work? The critics thought it did. And, after seeing it, I agree.

Of course, I went with some unease. Mostly because the Broadway houses are usually so uncomfortable; with little leg room, often difficult sightlines; and, with musicals, the actor/singers are miked and the amplification, for me, often distorts everything, especially fuzzying up the lyric moments.

This matinee is packed. I have an orchestra seat near the back on the left side (for $65 dollars/and that's at half price, if you please), but I have no sightline problems. The woman sitting on my right *does*, however; she can't see over the head in front of her (those damned lousy floor rakes in Broadway houses!), so she tilts toward me, and I tilt toward the guy on *my* left. Therefore, throughout Act One, I watch SWEENEY TODD on the bias, and that keeps me from being totally engaged (and gives me, to boot, a pain in my neck). The couple on my left do not return after the intermission (ahha!), so I move over left, one seat, and I'm more engaged through Act 2.

Within five minutes you forget that the actor/singers accompany themselves. When they are not "on," and accompanying themselves, they are on stage somewhere observing and accompanying the show. To me, there is a built-in Brechtian distancing to the piece to begin with; but having the actors play their own instruments distances the piece for me even more, so that I process *that* world's horror on stage, where people eat people, with *my* world's horrors, where here, now, the vermin of my world are inhabiting it, and devouring each other, *and us*, and all that is civilized.

This is the opening paragraph, by Sean Patrick Flahaven, from the Synopsis in the CD's album notes: "The curtain rises on a spare, run-down madhouse bordered by straight-backed chairs. Upstage is a towering shelf of Victorian bric-a-brac and a doorway, through which a warden appears and approaches Tobias, seated in a chair, straight-jacketed and gagged. The warden removes the restraints and Tobias sings "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd," joined by the ensemble.

"Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd. . .
His skin was pale and his eye was odd.
He shaved the faces of gentlemen
Who never thereafter were heard of again. . .

* * * * * * * *

Swing your razor wide, Sweeney!
Hold it to the skies!
Freely flows the blood of those
Who moralize. . ."

* * * * * * *

Sweeney Todd rises from a black coffin center stage, and the tale begins."

And a stunning beginning it is. The Sweeney entrance is a punch to the pupik (the belly button). (It doesn't hurt that Michael Cerveris, play/singing Todd, is intensely bald and riveting.) The audience gasps—then applauds. Like any good

beginning of any good musical, we will quickly know what we're in for: A Singspiel on the theme of bloody revenge.

That coffin, by the way, often is arranged as a table for the chairs on which the victims sit when their throats are slit.

Things I'm aware of in this production: While it is choreographed to the teeth, the staging seems logical and inevitable, and that the actor/singer/musicians motivate and make each move their own. The staging for the song, "Johanna" is stunning; difficult to describe, because, like a ballet moment, the moves, in space, seem to be taking on the logic of the music. "Johanna" is a song that the character Anthony sings when he first spots Sweeney's beautiful daughter and Anthony falls in love with her. It is lyrical and soaring—and is being sung from afar to a girl who doesn't know she is being sung to, and who is a ward and prisoner of Judge Turpin, one of the vermin in the piece. Typical Sondheim: rendering a sad, potentially dangerous moment, with a great, lyrical melody that turns into a duet in which the characters never touch. "Pretty Women" is another gorgeous song. Taken out of context, this seems to be a duet between two men, extolling the wonders of—well—pretty women. In fact, Sweeney, toying with his potential, unsuspecting, victim, as he shaves him, is Sweeney's prelude to cutting Turpin's throat (years before, Turpin had framed Sweeney, exiled Sweeney to Australia for life, in order to have his way with Sweeny's beautiful wife). While I'm watching the show I feel that these are the only gorgeous melodies in the piece. It's not until I buy the cast album and listen closely and over and over that I realize the score is filled with gorgeous melodies. "Wait" and "Not While I'm Around" are two such songs. But all the songs, really — including Sweeney's aria, "My Friends," to his newly-found razors — have sections that keep singing in the head.

Ditto, "Green Finch and Linnet Bird." This song, sung by Johanna, introduces her, sadly longing for caged birds to teach her how to sing in *her* dreary prison of a cage. The song has a folk-song quality for high voice that one can imagine a Renèe

Fleming legitimately including as an encore in a Lieder recital. But the song presents problems for me in a Broadway musical. In musical theatre, these high voices usually belong to the ingénue types that can get behind the melody, but who shortchange the words. The "Greenfinch and Linnet Bird" moment is one of those times I'd like an op trans translation above the stage, showing me the words, so that I can "suit the action" to them. One certainly gets the gist of the piece, but not the full blast of the dramatic moment. And I miss some of Sondheim's niceties, which I get later, when I listen to the cast album and follow the libretto. Like:

". . .Whence comes this melody constantly flowing?
Is it rejoicing or merely hallooing?"

Part of the problem, of course, is simply intention. These are questions Johanna is really asking—needs to ask. Here, if you can get the words at all, you get them as comments. Admittedly, t'aint easy to sing a piece with a high tessitura and play the cello at the same time (Johanna and Anthony play cellos throughout).

Admittedly, too: Following the libretto, while I listen to the CD, *I* can *see* the word and give it its due. Also, to deepen the resonance, I can google "Greenfinch" and "Linnet Bird" and other birds mentioned in the song—which I do— and get actual photos of the birds and interesting information about them. For instance, a nightingale is also mentioned in the song and I discover that nightingales "cannot endure captivity."

Actually I feel that the cello, rendering Johanna's subtext, marvelously undercuts the, to me, built in sentimentality of the ingénue high voice. To broaden the observation and discussion: Some voices — again, to me — seem more easily than others to articulate words on stage — Patti LuPone's and Alexander Gemignani's — in this production— certainly do so.

Lupone's English accent comes and goes, but her songs are clearly spoken, with strong intentions. Which surprise me. I had heard that her singing was often off-pitch and her diction

was not always clear. Not so here. Not only is everything she does clear, she is funny and sexy and her desire to have Sweeney is always clear and believable, and her pain at not getting him, and her death at his hands, are very moving, as she renders for us *her* center of pain. Also moving is her singing of the song, "Wait" — an interesting example of Sondheim's unique method of dramatization.

Sweeney Todd is anxious, almost crazed to want one of his intended victims to appear. Lovett, who, I think, really wants Todd to live in the moment (with her), soothes Todd's fever by, first, exploring how she can pretty up his room, then attacks the problem:

Easy now
Hush, love, hush.
Don't distress yourself,
What's your rush?
Keep you thoughts
Nice and lush. Wait.

("Nice and lush" is a line that makes Sondheim, Sondheim)

Then, in the release of the song, Lovett reverts to making the room cheery, while he waits:

I've been thinking flowers—
Maybe daisies—
To brighten up the room.
Don't you think some flowers,
Pretty daisies, might relieve the gloom?
Ah, wait, love, wait.

But Todd stays obsessively focused on his revenge and Lovett expresses her frustration in a few lines of dialogue and then reverts back to the A section of the song; but this time there is more urgency and pleading in her voice and in the rush of the melody.

Slow, love, slow.

Time's so fast.
Now goes quickly—
See, now it's past!
Soon will come.
Soon will last.
Wait.

And, on the line, "See, now it's past," Sondheim varies the melody and lands on a higher note for the word "past," and LuPone reveals a more lyrical part of her voice that renders her pain. (Lovett also mentions Gillyflowers in her catalog of flowers to decorate the room. I google "gillyflowers" and now I also have a picture of *them* in my mind's eye, when I return to the song)

So LuPone is lucky. She has the kind of voice (and technique) that can cut through the obstacle of amplification.

But practically all voices, it seems to me, have the now-accepted amplification systems as obstacles to clarity of diction. Again, the sound gets fuzzy around the edges. The training schools, besides needing to teach basic vocal and diction techniques, perhaps should also teach techniques to cut through the amplification barrier. I'm sure state-of-the-art amplification systems that are so true and clear exist, and with so little distortion that they could solve the problem; but economics probably make that level of sound system a prohibitive expenditure. As usual, the live actor will have to compensate. . .

Buckets of blood are spilled in this production: Literally. When a throat is slit, one of the performers pours one bucket of stage blood into another. Effective. Heightens the horror.

The standing ovation at the final curtain, for a change, seems spontaneous. I know *I* stand and clap my head off. These performer/musicians have earned it. I also feel we all stand because the view of the world on that stage is mirroring the horror we all feel at living today in a madhouse; where we're all

being wronged, where our core values are being corrupted and defiled, and in which we would all like to get even on "them."

I take these exhilarating feelings with me out into 50th street and I am on a high as I walk east to Broadway and my mind keeps buzzing, buzzing around, wanting to do a study of Sondheim as dramatist—*is* there such a study? —and I'm putting together how much Sweeney falls into the Woyzeck/Harry Ape/Lenny, in "Of Mice and Men"/ kinds of victim-Innocents that surface in drama as the inhumanity in one's time is exacerbated and refined, as our is, and I buzz along starting to focus on Michael Cerveris and why I can't get a handle on what I'm feeling about the performance -- I don't think it's him; it's something else--and how delighted I am that Alexander Gemignani has come so far since he was a student in the School Of Music at the University of Michigan and where I had used him in a new musical, "Love Songs" in the Festival of New Works —and it all keeps buzzing as I turn down Broadway and head to West 47th street and, for some reason, as I get close to the Edison Hotel, I go for my wallet in my back pocket (did I want to buy something?) and I discover that it's not there and *everything*—cash, credit cards, license and stuff, stuff, stuff— my whole life is in my wallet, because I did not have a hotel room when I first arrived to stash most of the money and just take the one credit card with me as I usually do, and I keep poking in and out of all my pockets in my pants and the jacket I'm holding because it's an unusually cold day in June and — no! — no wallet and I am beyond panic because it is my first day of a four-day stay and everything, every fucking thing is in that wallet and suddenly I'm aware of crowds, the thousands of people who are rushing, laughing, past me because all the matinees are spilling out and I'm frozen in a spot where out-of-towners get on the sightseeing busses and the hawkers are thrusting leaflets in my face and the contrast of all that jollity and activity exacerbate my panic and I instinctively turn and head back—no! start running— back to the Eugene O'Neill Theatre and try to remember, did any shifty characters brush up against me, which is possible, and when did I last use my wallet? — actually lay hands on my wallet? — and who the fuck can remember!? —wait! Didn't I pay for the

breakfast? —I did, so did I leave it at the counter of The Polish Tea room? —no, I know I put it back in my back pocket—so then— oh Christ! — I'm beating myself up real good and feeling desperate and thinking, if the wallet *was* dropped, thinking needle in a haystack things and running through my Rolodex of people I can call in New York on a Sunday evening to loan me money so that I can survive the 4 days, and I'm feeling that running back to the theatre/haystack will be fruitless and when I arrive at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre they are closing up to clean up the theatre before the evening performance and I ask a young woman if I can get back to where I was sitting (did I flash my ticket stub at her — I might have because it was in my jacket) — and she says yes and I run to the seat where I had sat and I look around and I don't see the wallet and I run back to that same woman and ask if they have a lost and found and she says no but she points to a black gentleman wearing a uniform of an usher and she says he leads the clean up and he may be able to help you and I rush to him, tell him I may have lost my wallet and I guess he sees the panic and calmly tells me that we're sure to find it and I take him back to where I was seated and he looks around and I look around and now I spot it under the seat of the left-leaning lady and everything is in it and I tip the guy and skip back out and join the happy happy throng, which is a word I never use, "throng," but seems apt because the world is now throng-like and I throng back to the Edison, where a room—a really nice room—is ready and I call Continental Airlines and they tell me that my bag left Houston, is headed back to Newark Airport, and it will be delivered to the Edison as soon as it arrives.

I shower. Rest. Calm down and, still high, I go down to the Polish Tea room for a bowl of their great matzoh ball soup, then it's back to the Half-Price Ticket booths and I buy a single ticket to JACQUES BREL IS ALIVE AND WELL AND LIVING IN PARIS."

(To Be Continued. . .)