

HARVEY

The first memory I have of Harvey Schmidt was in 1949 at the University of Texas when he came to audition for the Curtain Club. Tall and skinny with a pronounced twang, he apologetically explained that he was not an actor, but he loved the theatre and he could play the piano and do posters. Eureka! Actors we didn't need. Actors we had. But a piano player! A poster maker! We signed him up and put him to work. The first poster he did was for a play called BEGGAR ON HORSEBACK and it was wonderful. It was so wonderful that it was terrible. The problem was that the posters, attached to bulletin boards and tied to trees, were so terrific that they were all stolen almost as soon as they were put up. People took them and had them framed. (I wish I had done that; I would love to have one.)

Not long after, Harvey played the piano and wrote the title song for a Curtain Club revue called HIPSY-BOO! It was a wonderfully sassy/tacky number with music and lyrics both by Harvey. The revue, which was produced in 1950, was a celebration of Broadway musicals from 1900 to 1950, all the way from "Gallagher & Sheen" to "There Is Nothing Like A Dame." Harvey, in the pit with nothing but a drummer, sounded like a full orchestra. I was impressed. To be honest, I was awed.

Just a month or so after that show, I got an offer to direct the annual college musical, to be done in the big, one thousand seat, Hogg Auditorium. It paid a fee and I was ecstatic since this was the first time anyone had ever offered to pay me for directing. However, when I saw the scripts and songs (submitted by students) I was appalled. They were awful! Hopeless! And the show was scheduled to open in just a couple of months. Well, I thought, I have to come up with something better than this, so I contacted this Schmidt fellow and asked him if he would like to write a musical with me - and I offered to split the fee. He said yes - and that is how it all began.

We didn't intend to become writers, either one of us. I was a director. Harvey was a commercial artist (and, as it turned out, a great one, one of the best in America). But that first show we did, written in just a few weeks, had a profound effect upon us. It was a hit, a huge hit. It was such a huge hit that the entire one thousand seats were sold out immediately for its four performance run. It was such a huge hit that, for the first time,

they sold standing room, and when that was filled up, they sat people in the aisles, and then finally, in response to the overwhelming demand, they opened the side windows of the auditorium so that people could gather in little clumps outside and catch some tiny hint of this magical experience. For that is what it was, something magical. Something in what we had produced together, cross-pollinating our disparate talents, made people laugh. It made them weep. And it made them feel a special kind of exhilaration.

Now let me be clear. Our show was no great turning point in the history of the American musical theatre. Harvey was an untrained musician. I knew almost nothing about the form. In my entire six years at the Drama Department we never did a single musical. They were considered too frivolous. I don't think I had ever seen more than one or two stage musicals, and most of the movie musicals at that time were hackneyed star vehicles with a few great songs and dances shoved into an idiotic plot. Our show, which we called FRESHMAN SONG even though the traditional title for the annual musical was TIME STAGGERS ON, had been great fun, but we didn't take it too seriously. We returned to our regular lives and ambitions and tried to write it off as just another offbeat college memory. And yet . . .

Time ticks. The world turns. The Korean War erupted and we were drafted into the Army, first me and then Harvey. I was in Baltimore; he in El Paso. But because of the lingering memory of that college musical, we kept in touch. We started writing songs by long-distance mail and sending them back and forth across the country. We even began to talk about doing another musical, perhaps a revue. Then, when the Army stint was over, we met in Fort Worth and boarded a Greyhound bus for New York City. We rented an apartment with two other roommates. One of them was Robert Benton, who went on to become a four time Oscar winner, as both writer and director; the other a muscle man named George Gilbreath, who left to join Mae West in her final stage tour. (A side note: Benton, who had been Harvey's roommate in college, had also been drafted. But somehow he managed to get to New York first, find a job at ESQUIRE, buy a small convertible, and then, before he drove down to Fort Bliss, cut out all of the Brooks Brothers labels from his clothes so he could sew them into his army uniforms.)

When we arrived in the city, Harvey got a job. Right away. He had brought a portfolio (notice that word, "portfolio") of his artwork, which made a big impression. LOOK magazine published a series of paintings he

had done in Mexico while studying there on the G. I. Bill. He got an agent, a top-notch one. And he got a job as the graphic designer for NBC Television, which had just begun to produce specials in color. It was a time of transition as the old studio system in Hollywood began to crumble and many of the major screen talents were exploring this new venue. NBC had bought one of the gigantic old studios in Brooklyn where the movies were originally made and turned it into a mammoth television sound stage, big enough at one point to produce (live) the sinking of the Titanic.

Harvey's job was to provide graphics for this ongoing cascade of big, splashy color television shows. For example, he would do multiple sketches and full paintings to suggest the world of **THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME** or the opera **CARMEN**, or Mary Martin in **PETER PAN**. A life-long fan of Mary's, he told her later when we did **I DO! I DO!** for her and Robert Preston, of the time when he was in the Brooklyn studio, kneeling on the floor making some changes in his art work, and Mary, trying out the harness for the "flying," would come swooping right above him, singing directly to him. One of his major assignments was to do the colorful lettering for the "crawl" listing the credits. The shows were all done live and, according to Harvey, there was often bickering and legal wrangling about the "billing" right up to performance time, with Harvey having to redo the lettering, raising up (or lowering down) some actor's name, the ink still wet as the cameras began.

With the onset of his success, Harvey began to indulge his life-long passion for travel. How he loved it, hungered for it. He had grown up in a series of very small Texas towns. His father, a Methodist minister, was moved (like someone in the military) to a new location every few years, so Harvey never had a real "home town." The closest he came was a place (sorry, I've forgotten the name) where they were "stationed" for a few of his most formative years. It was outside Houston and somehow it was decided that the area in which this town was located would be submerged as part of a great reservoir lake that Houston was creating to increase its water supply.

So - they "moved" the town. Huge crews with machines came and lifted up the buildings off their foundations and moved them somewhere else. Later in his life, Harvey went back there. For whatever political reason, the dam was never built and the area was never flooded, so there it stood. Or, more accurately, there it didn't stand. And yet the foundations were still there. And the streets. And the memories. Harvey took photographs of the sidewalk in front of his (vanished) house, where he had scrawled his name in the cement. He took pictures of the foundation of the movie theatre where he had seen **GONE WITH THE WIND**. He took pictures of the

place where his father's church once stood. I often wondered if this "Twilight Zone" experience, this lack of "place," had anything to do with his restless urge to travel.

At all events, when Harvey finally made it to New York (and made it in New York) one of the first things he did was travel. Weekdays he worked at NBC. Weekends he traveled. He would take a taxi to Idlewilde (now Kennedy), go up to the PanAm counter and ask: "What is your next flight out?" The attendant would reply: "What destination?" to which Harvey would respond: "It doesn't matter. Just the next flight." Then when he found out - Mexico City or Rio or some such (usually not Europe) - he would book a first-class round trip, returning Sunday night. Sometimes he would take a small bag. Sometimes not. Often he would simply buy whatever he needed there (including clothes) and then leave them behind when he left. His theory, not a bad one, was that the first few days you are in a new place, everything about it is engraved permanently in your mind. The longer you stay, the more you "get used to it," the less vivid the images. And it was the images, the visual imprint, that he most craved. Interestingly, later in his life it was just the opposite. As he grew older, he wouldn't book a suite at the Ritz in Paris unless it could be a specific one with a specific view. By that time, of course, he had already had a lot of first impressions.

Oh, the stories! Oh, the adventures! Oh, the misadventures, as well. When he found out that the last luxury train trip to Texas was scheduled for a certain date, Harvey immediately booked a compartment. However, stuck in New York traffic in a taxi, he arrived at Penn Station just in time to see his train pull out. Panicked, but not deterred, he asked where the first stop was and when told it was Pittsburgh, he jumped into a taxi, went to LaGuardia and boarded a plane for Pittsburgh. Then he waited for seventeen hours for his train to arrive.

If travel was one of Harvey's secret fantasies, playing cocktail piano was another. In the early days and throughout his life, Harvey would stay in very posh hotels and if there wasn't a cocktail pianist at the piano in the lounge, he would quietly seat himself and begin to play, taking requests from the guests. Since he was totally self-taught and had learned by listening to the American Songbook standards which he loved, he could accommodate most requests, even the obscure ones. Once, however, an elderly lady with a heavily made-up face and a lipstick laden scowl (the kind Harvey loved to paint) seated herself next to the piano and ordered in a brusque, whiskey-flavored, voice: "Play "Hawaiian War Chant!" Stumped, Harvey said: "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I don't know Hawaiian War

Chant.” She sat for a long time, staring at him with baleful, burning eyes, and then she whispered darkly: “You know it.” And she left.

Most of Harvey’s travels were alone, but on one occasion he arranged to take his parents to Europe. Both parents came from a long line of preacher/farmers whose parents had left Germany before World War 1 to avoid being drafted into the German army. They settled in central Texas, which had a very large German-speaking population, but none of them, neither Harvey’s mother and father nor their many siblings (each had eleven) had ever been back to Germany. So this was Harvey’s chance. He booked passage on the maiden voyage of the new luxury ocean liner, the Leonardo DaVinci . He booked the Royal Suite, which consisted of a large living room with outside balcony and a grand circular staircase leading up to the two bedrooms on the second floor.

Staying, as they were, in the most expensive place on the ship, they were invited on the first night out to dine at the captain’s table. This traditional perk was usually occasioned with fancy evening clothes and a glorious dinner featuring many exotic and exquisite courses accompanied by the finest of wines. In this case, however, Harvey’s father, Reverend Schmidt, wore his blue serge suit and ordered what he always had for the evening meal: Special K with bananas.

Harvey kept expanding his horizons. He did Egypt. He did in South America. He took a small villa for a summer in the south of France. He took the large villa in Porto Santo Stefano for a year. He went to Finland for the Winter Solstice. He went to Berlin (during the Russian occupation) to see a production of THE FANTASTICKS. He went to endless spas and resorts in his quest to lose weight and get tan. (One of his favorites was a place in Switzerland where every morning a huge German nurse would wake him with: “Herr Schmidt, Ve Vill Veigh you now!” after which she would march him, naked, to a cement stall to be sprayed by a fire hose, trying to protect his genitals as best he could.)

In addition to his own travels, Harvey’s art work soon took him on others. FORTUNE magazine sent him to the Pacific Northwest to paint the lumber industry, then, on the occasion of New Jersey’s 300th Anniversary, commissioned him to do a portfolio of paintings of the state, anything he wanted. CBS chose him to do their yearly calendar (52 sketches) one of the most prized assignments in the graphic world, since it involved a year long, all expenses paid, chance to travel back and forth between New York and Hollywood. Harvey became a favorite of SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, a

strange turn of events since he knew almost nothing about sports. He covered the World Series, the Super Bowl, golf tournaments in Nicaragua. He was sent to the Bahamas and taught SCUBA diving so he could paint his impressions of the underwater world. And all of this, you understand, was done while maintaining a successful career as a composer of Broadway musicals.

Inevitably, I suppose, it all came to a head when we got our first Broadway show, **110 IN THE SHADE**. Harvey had accepted an assignment from **SPORTS ILLUSTRATED** to go on a lion hunt with the Shah of Iran. He had already received his “shots” and done his passport “stuff” when, by a stroke of fate, it was decided that our show would go into rehearsal that very same week. He had to choose. Fortunately for me, he decided on the show. And from that time forward he gave up his art career. Well, that’s not actually true. He gave up his graphic assignments, but he transferred all of his energy and talents into doing design and art work for our shows. Brilliant, brilliant work. Work which has been carefully saved and is on display (along with many of his commercial assignments) as part of our new web site.

To finish up this brief chapter about Harvey (there will be much more in my upcoming book, **TRYING TO REMEMBER**) - he was a well of music. And of art. It literally gushed out of him. In our early collaboration, I always wrote lyrics first and then Harvey composed to that. We simply didn’t know it could be done another way. Later, when we came to New York and were roommates, I realized that Harvey was always composing. Well, it wasn’t that, exactly. He was “releasing” the music that was constantly building up inside him. He would go to the piano, sometimes for hours, and “release” melody after melody, sometimes pausing to rush over and do a drawing or a doodle. For him music and art were part of the same thing.

Although he had trained as an artist, he had actually been both drawing and composing his whole life. His mother taught piano. But she couldn’t teach Harvey. He was too restless. He could already “do” it. And it was more fun to play something jazzy or romantic than one of the tunes from the hymnal. In his whole life, Harvey was never able to connect those little “dots” (music notation) with what the experience of music was to him. It had nothing whatsoever to do with the mind, any more than breathing has to do with the mind. You just do it. Or you die.

I have tried, with these few scattershot memories, to call Harvey up for you, to bring him back to life. I can't, of course. Not really. Harvey was the simplest, most straight-forward person I have ever known. He was also the most illusive. If you want to know Harvey, the best source is not my words but in the wonderful one hour video the Dramatist Guild made a few years ago where you can see Harvey in his home in Tomball, Texas, at his beloved Steinway, telling wonderful funny (and often revealing) stories about himself. (Available on our website.)