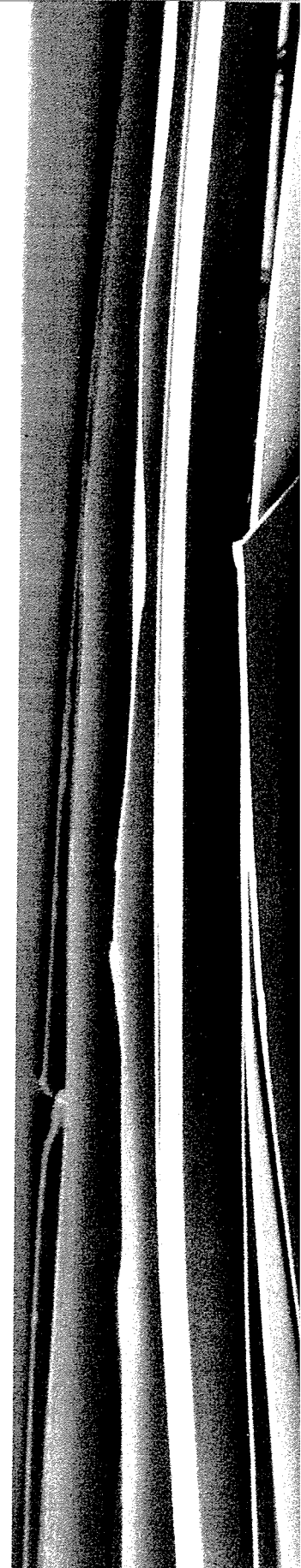


The Live Art Almanac is a collection of 'found' writing about and around Live Art. The Live Art Almanac brings together texts which are representative of the most engaging, provocative, thoughtful writing about Live Art and the cultural landscape in which it is set, and which were first published between April 2006 and April 2008.

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Travels Through *1001 nights cast*

Barbara Campbell

Edit of script for performance # 17 of *1001 nights cast*

Performed at 9:56PM on 7 July 2005 from Paris
Alone in Paris, she was without guidance. No one here could assure her of a risk-free path. She was out of her own country and found it difficult to make decisions. But today the problem had to be confronted. How to go about it? She was too shy to stop a woman in the street and have to struggle with the language: so hard to convey the precise meaning, especially when it came to the important matter of where to get a good haircut.

She perceived from the number of well-groomed men in the area that here, in this small section of the city, perhaps more than any other, appearances mattered. She walked the narrow streets, peering into shop-fronts, looking for the right constellation of visual cues. She passed by several salons, which may have been acceptable but for that ominous beast in the corner: the retro hairdryer helmet on wheels.

She came across a tattoo parlour. Surely if you were in the business of body adornment, she

thought, you would know about the masters and mistresses of hair in your immediate environment. It was a shame the woman at the counter spoke such little English. From the recesses of her own unreliable vocabulary, she found all that was required under "c": chercher, les cheveux, couper, cette arrondissement. It wasn't really a recommendation but the young woman pointed further up the street, towards the Beaubourg.

She scanned the shop through the plate glass. No blow dryers on wheels, only men: men in the chairs, men wielding scissors, men talking to other men via mirrors, one man sweeping, another one shampooing, and right in the front a sweet looking, slightly-built Asian man at the counter. One last sign clinched it for her and that was the sign on the window itself. Just one word – an invitation to engage in life itself: "Sing".

He assured her he could fit her in that very afternoon. Nor was he fazed by her already short hair. There was just one thing: she wouldn't permit him to use the electric clippers – as short as possible but by hand only. She knew it would be stretching

both time and talent, but the display of manual skill was the thing she enjoyed most about this ritual. Besides, at that time, she needed physical contact, even if it were only at the hands of this stranger.

She knew she made him nervous. She could see her own taut expression in the glass. But it wasn't often she put her trust in the hands of another man, another cutter, that is. When the cut is this short, each hair counts. Round and round he went, checking, cutting, sculpting, thinning, refining.

Gradually her facial muscles relaxed, her breathing became deeper and she started to ask him about himself: she'd seen so very few Asian men in Paris.

It was his shop. He'd been here eight years. He'd been in Paris thirty years. He came with his parents. They escaped from Cambodia. They'd been refugees. The name of the shop was in fact his name. His name was Sing. She would be back.

**Edit of script for performance # 66 of 1001 nights
cast**

Performed at 8:49PM on 25 August 2005 from Paris
No story has come in and now, with an hour or so to go, something must be conjured from the ether. I discover when I retype my prompt back into Google that back in 2000, *Behind the Curtain* was a project in which bloggers recorded a day in their life. Although that project has ended I think, why not take that very simple idea as a way of manufacturing a script for tonight's performance? For I am the man, well, woman, behind the curtain of this particular project and this is a day in its life.

Since this is a narrative, I'm obliged to start at the beginning of the day.

The alarm clock in my head goes off at 7.30 am, as usual, no matter how much sleep or wakefulness

or nightmares or good creative thoughts have filled it in the preceding eight hours. At this particular 7.30 it's raining and so even harder to swing the feet off the bed and onto the floor, but I do, because the show must go on, it's the contract I've signed with you, my audience. I shuffle over to pick up the old blue pottery mug I use as a water container and on my way to fill it from the bathroom I turn on my PowerBook G4. By the time I've shuffled back with the water, the computer is booted up and my eyes are preparing themselves for reading.

I launch straight into the *International Herald Tribune* link to stories from the Middle East. There's more news from Gaza but for the Western media outlets, it seems like we're coming to the end of that particular episode of the narrative. The Palestinians are happy for now, the evicted settlers unhappy but resigned. So today I turn my attention to Iraq as it struggles to draft a new constitution by a mysteriously contrived deadline. There seem to be big issues still to be ironed out, like federalism and the role of religion in the law and this of course is contrasted with the daily experience of the citizens who must focus on the reality of no water, electricity, security, medical supplies and so on.

I'm struck by one particular quote from a "man on the street" interviewed by the *New York Times* journalist. "I am not very convinced about what is going on behind the curtains," Shawkat Falih, 40, a Sunni street vendor in Baghdad said darkly. "The process should be visible and audible to the Iraqi people." So I choose "behind the curtains" and I wonder if Mr Falih knows that this is also a famous quote from *The Wizard of Oz*. You'll remember, it comes at the moment when Dorothy and her gang of three finally meet the Wizard. Toto pulls away a curtain to reveal a mere mortal at the controls of the phantasmagoria that is the Wizard – all smoke and

mirrors, *son et lumiere*. So who is the Wizard – the man behind the curtain or the illusion? Plato asked it centuries before in his *Parable of the Cave in The Republic*. I don't suppose any of these illusions or allusions would be playing on the mind of Mr Falih in Baghdad.

I did the watercolour, photoshopped it and posted it onto the site as today's prompt. I also sent it as an attachment to the writer whom I thought might like to respond with a story.

Then followed the usual train of events – shower, breakfast, email writing and reading before I got down to the dreary end of the show: transferring the videos of the performances from tape to hard drive for editing and then back to tape for archiving. So cruel to have to hear one's fumbles in delivery and see the outbreaks of acne. I left it as often as I could to do the slightly more exciting things like cleaning and shopping and making social dates with other artists. Towards five o'clock I started to get a little anxious that no stories had yet come in. I sent off a politely questioning email to the writer whom I thought was going to submit, but by six o'clock, when the writing deadline had passed, there was still nothing.

To complicate matters, I'd organised a little soirée this evening for artists from the Middle East who also have studios here. The first, and luckily only, guests arrived soon after 6pm – Nadjibi, a sculptor and painter from Iran with his young daughter Najarb. It soon became apparent that we had no lingua franca and as usual, it was the child who made the social exchange possible. She showed me some of her own creations and from her pressed clay mask I learnt the Farsi for eyes, nose and mouth. The other little clay face had a moustache like her father's and so that was added to my vocabulary. Of course now, only an hour after

they've left, I don't remember any of these words but she graciously gave me one of the clay masks so perhaps the words will come to me in the night from the distorted clay mouth. With pained apologies from me, I had to explain to my guests that tonight I had no story and would now have to do something about it. A final cocktail of Iranian, French and English words was raised at the door and I turned to face the keyboard.

Now, just before I reach my word limit, I swivel towards the windows and notice the quality of the light. This afternoon's golden glow is what the émigré architect Harry Seidler once called an aberrant light, one that he wanted none of his modernist towers bathed in. I smile as I see Notre Dame à *contre-jour*, the tips of the plane trees just outside glinting and winking in the breeze.

Written for Ctrl+Shift on 29 May 2007 from Madrid

You do have to be careful of Mondays when you're travelling. Everyone has gone back to work but you are left stranded. They won't even open their museums and galleries for you, sometimes not even their shops. And so you wander into anywhere that promises comfort and a way to pass the time. Bookshops, for instance.

And there it was, on the first table of bestsellers: *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion. Friends had warned me not to read it at the time of its release: they were afraid I wouldn't be ready for it, that it would open up the wounds again. And they were probably right. But the Monday, the overcast day, the citizens and institutions and booksellers of New York had all conspired to send me a sign and so I bought it. Just around the corner I added grapefruit juice, bananas, olives, cheese and two bialis from the neighbourhood grocery store en route back to the

capacious loft a friend had generously made available for this trip.

Didion's husband of nearly 40 years had died suddenly at home at the end of 2003. The magical thinking of the title refers to her belief that he would be returning and that when he did he would need his shoes and therefore she could not possibly throw them out.

Funny, I thought, how she put these two thoughts together: the fact that he would be returning and the impossibility, the unthinkability that the shoes could be thrown out. Both of these things I encountered in the years after Neil's death but they were separated.

I thought Neil would come back because he did not die at home. He died out in the world. He died near the border of the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales, Australia, after doing a few errands in the light-industrial Canberra suburb of Fyshwick. He did not return home. His car did not return. And so, refusing the certainty of his death, I had to believe that he was still out doing errands and that he would finish these errands some time. Now, I realise, I thought this way not just because I would never have to accept the truth but because it kept him in a state of usefulness, of engagement with the world he knew and loved. He was running art errands therefore he was productive. I know from certain pieces of evidence – the last "to do" list he wrote, the objects in the car, the receipts in his wallet, what these errands were. I know, for instance, that he went to a glass-cutter to pick up a drinking glass which had had a hole cut into the base so that he could make a new piece in his ongoing Hydromancy series (1993-2002). I know he went to a hardware store to buy a special file which would allow him to recondition the stone of his grinding wheel.

And the clothes. I have heard and read about the practice of disposing of the clothes of the recently departed. Friends and relatives will volunteer to pack everything up almost immediately and 'help you' by taking them off to the local charity shop. The thinking is that it helps you 'move on'. This idea appalled Didion for the reason that her husband would be needing them when he came back. It appalled me because ... why? ... because all of his clothes were a representation of him. The sheer mass of them could almost be him.

Neil had a limited colour range: blues, greys and blacks. When we first got together, I told him it was possible that he could wear one other colour – to match his blonde eyebrows and set off his blue eyes. We went shopping and for his first birthday in our relationship I bought him a light gold sweater. I was right. He glowed. I'm not sure he thought I was right but he was happy for me to make this change in him and he wore it often. It was the one high-key item in his wardrobe.

For nearly three years after his death I stayed in the studio/residence that we had shared for just over three years. When the time came to physically move on, to a much smaller place, back to my pre-marital city of Sydney, everything that he had acquired in the 18 years of living and working in that place, had to be handled, thought through, packed and distributed in a way that felt right to me. There could be no regrets. It was only in the last week of this operation, which took months of full-time labour, that finally, I could bundle up all those blue, black and grey textiles and take them to the local charity shops of Queanbeyan.

But some items had been distributed long before this point. In the first few days after Neil's death I had given his gold sweater to his brother to wear. Old tee-shirts were used as rags and packing

materials. His leather Blundstone boots were buried in the holes dug for new tree plantings. I had also read somewhere that there is a ritual whereby the coats of a dead man are distributed amongst his friends. And so I dispatched big, soft parcels to men of all shapes and sizes in Victoria, South Australia, Northern New South Wales and locally in Canberra. The last one to go was a full-length grey woollen over-coat that went to our friends' very tall son who was about to step out into the world beyond high school and Canberra and travel solo to Denmark. Ever the champion of re-purposing and recycling, I think Neil would have been pleased with the distribution.

Before leaving the New York loft I selected a book from the shelf to read on the flight and in its place inserted the *The Year of Magical Thinking* for the next reader passing through.

The story written for Ctrl+Shift on 29 May 2007 subsequently appear in a reworked form for night, number 731, 21 June 2007 of *1001 nights cast*.

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www.1001.net.au
www.ctrlp-artjournal.org