

Then There's Audrey, Lovely Audrey

Personal Speculation

by b. b. brown

When Hollywood designed its version of the stage musical, "Little Shop of Horrors", the filmmakers involved sought fidelity to the original hit, which meant that everyone died and the evil plant won. But review audiences didn't go for it. After all, if you grow to care about people, fictional or otherwise, the last thing you wish upon them is ugly obliteration. Therefore, the ending was reshot, the plant vanquished, and the hero married the heroine.

This happy ending was a blessed event, for exposure to this movie came at a time of intense stress. In the fall, a series of mini-strokes had progressively incapacitated my father. That winter, a brother who was suffering a divorce after twenty-three years of devoted marriage had had his leg crushed in a car wreck. My mother now had two invalids on her hands. And so I moved back home.

And then there was "Audrey". The heroine of Little Shop of Horrors was meant to be, as Howard Ashman wrote, "everything sweet". As played by actress-singer, Ellen Greene, she was. Delicate, vulnerable, and enduring, this creature was shaped by skill and breathed to life with passion. Strange was the effect this "character" had on me. As discussed elsewhere, I suffer from a mood disorder which distracts my mind and jumbles my emotions, so that composure is not commonplace. On "meeting" Audrey, I lost even those few moments of composure. Anxiety became ubiquitous despite medication, while depression sank in: a depression so profound with its attendant debilitating pain that the only equivalent was my first severe depressive experience twenty-five years before. Little eased the pain, nothing erased it.

Not until I started writing, for only when actually writing was there no pain. Revising the dialogue of a little play, I changed it into a musical and wrote the lyrics for ten songs. It was done in four days, revisions and all. Next, I jumped onto an ensemble comedy. Thirty characters came together and danced their dance without a care. Although tired from keeping the pain pushed away--and triumphing over it--I turned to another script that leapt into my hands begging to be sketched out. As I began throwing down words, the creeping fog in my head cleared and the pages poured out. However, by the time I had reached the script's last section, my brain had emptied itself

and gone limp. Luckily, the intense depression lifted. Audrey was now part of my spirit-- I felt her there, full and vibrant--she was content to wait, but I dared not call her out again. For though the pain was gone, my carcass was too frail. But, still, there was a hunger.

I watched films featuring Ellen Greene, the actress who created Audrey on stage and screen. I had no knowledge of who she was--this actress, Ellen—but she had bonded in my feelings with the ideal character of Audrey. However, this meant a greater frustration, because she had become both real and inaccessible. I would never greet the reality of flesh and brain. So it became necessary to split them apart. Recalling that Shakespeare spoke of love painting winged cupid blind, my strategy became simple. I must see better. If Ellen was an actress with superb technique and superior discretion, then giving her larger dimension in my feelings should bring perspective on the fictional Audrey, thereby reducing my vulnerability.

As I experienced these films with those other women created by the actress, lovely Audrey drew away and gentle Ellen came closer. I began to love them both, though separately, for they shared incredibly attractive qualities. When forced to live each day on a nervous edge, what others may consider to be trivial may take on a curious importance, so nagging questions began as to why Audrey had first attracted me so intensely. No one else seemed to be so marked by this character's personality: people noticed the cleavage and the voice. What of the technical subtlety and precision? What of the perceptiveness? What of the gentleness?

The only answer to this inexplicable blindness to Audrey's reality must be the "prejudice" of emotions. A person's feelings, whether underdeveloped or mature, good or bad, are shaped and given fullness by experience. In this way, the feeling-shapes of prejudice define the things to which we are sensitive. It was the specific qualities that Audrey embodied, like Pymalion falling in love with his own sculpture, which had drawn me irresistably. Which qualities were these?

One characteristic--seemingly obvious when you consider that it was designed by a singer who acts--is that Audrey makes all types of spontaneous, expressive sounds like a happy child, as when she squeaks in joy at Seymour's announcement that his new plant is named "Audrey II". Moreover, like a puppy she always seems to has her mouth slightly open which, contrary to making her appear doltish, combines with her sensitive eyes to create a feeling of vulnerability. Although the slight speech defect adds to the humor of her character, in the "real world" it would bar an attractive woman from

getting even the simplest secretarial job, thereby explaining why Audrey lives on "skid row" and is referred to by her boss as a misfit. Then there are those delicate, embarrassed glances as when her sado-masochistic sexual relationship with the dentist is revealed to the one she loves, Seymour. As logical as these characteristics may seem while the story unfolds without stop, it is fascinating to find that they weren't mentioned in the original script. They were implications drawn by the actress, selected for suitability, and given life through her feelings and craft. In her view, a very clear one, she feels that modest, affectionate Audrey is an underdog who tries to survive her grisly existence with a modest grace. In a word, she plays with life.

But are the blond wig, tight dresses, matching high heels, and bouncing cleavage "playful"? Yes, of course, adornment and decoration are meant to enhance our lives through beauty, and beauty even at its most serious is always playful. Although she's not an ingenue, she's also not a spider trapping prey. If anything, she's the one who's trapped by living according to arbitrary conventions which define what is attractive only in a specific situation within a specific culture. High heels only do well on hard surfaces and do not draw the same admiration in the midst of a rainforest as they do in a honky-tonk. Audrey is simply a very feminine woman using limited knowledge to express her femininity. Her sexuality, therefore, is one more, sometimes humorous, aspect of her playfulness.

When you consider sex as an instinct of our species, Schiller's suggestion, of playfulness as nature's way of shaping sex to creative ends, clearly defines a basic aspect of the human situation. The sex instinct in the raw is chaos, while repression leads to irrational destructiveness rather than creative expression. But only by restructuring these living drives and qualities as they are in motion can we transcend mere "survival", which science so proudly worships these days, and develop the capacity not just for the continuation of life but for its enhancement. To do this, we move from sexuality into the maturity of eroticism through the medium of beauty which, to repeat, is itself a form of play. Enhancing the quality of life by cosmetics, hairdressing, clothing, and such is not by definition vanity, but a way to draw personal fullness out of life. While Audrey might be misinformed about what brings out her best qualities, or even what those qualities are, she is not foolish in attempting to do so, because she is simply trying to shape a personal ideal of eroticism, which is a substantive aspect of life, just as an artist shapes paint on a canvas into a unique perception of life.

The human agency adopted for structuring sex and love to the larger

cultural end of development, which adapts itself to this task within the closely bound fabric of time through uncounted forms, has typically been marriage. As a synthesizing form, marriage can contribute by soothing and reconciling the mad twins of sex and love into a creative unity; renegades who otherwise often burn themselves into separate impotence. Synthesized through the act of play, they embody passion, which sensitizes the feelings of the flesh to the extended and deepened mood of maturity. The memory of the flesh then grows with this development. (Life absorbs and remembers profound emotions even when the individual mind forgets many important and profound facts: what has been felt thereby changes our capacity to live.) Consequently, the depth and extent of emotional maturation has to do with sensitivity, and not with chronological "aging".

Yet another aspect to which the concept of marriage, whatever its form, has a close relationship is the consummation and eventual maturity of the marriage bond into a completely new person, of what in law is known as a corporate person. Two (or more) people become a single entity with rights and powers exceeding those of either one in isolation. They become an embodied and potentially creative part of their culture by existing in and through the resources of that culture. Further, as noted by close observers throughout history, individual personalities are qualified--changed--in this intimate relation, so there are no guarantees that things will work out, for people's weaknesses and strengths do not always intertwine to their mutual benefit. The same is true of all partners in play, whether it be in athletics, art, sex, or love, that consummation does not ensure growth. (Life is play, that's why it's adventure.)

So which of Audrey's qualities attracted me? In brief, it was nurturing and the need to be nurtured. She was giving, sensitive, delicate but vital, and had faith in "something better", that life could offer more than she had experienced. These are life-qualities. How could they not attract anyone who's sensitive to life? Secondly, she is the type of person who longs to receive as much as she gives, who, unable to be self-sufficient, looks for her complement in love. And there is much Audrey needs: life she sees as of value, but herself as valueless; she perceives many of life's consistencies and worth, but is confused by its contradictions (who isn't?); and, perhaps most attractive of all, she is passion waiting to bloom. All these qualities would captivate anyone whose prejudices, or sensibilities, had been overly refined while their self-esteem was beaten to a pulp during the process cheerily termed "growing up". In essence, I'm Audrey's mirror image, and we are legion.

One man in love, as the writer Borges put it, is all men in love. Some might hazard, in witness of the mounds of bad poetry, that love is a closed circle with no relation to anything outside of itself. But this is inaccurate, for universality and individuality meet in the relation called love, which is not a hermetic world but an aesthetic condition that, although reaching little beyond the immediate personal in itself, creates fertile ground for reshaping people and the world. Quality (as value) develops sensitivity in people by enhancing their capacity for the passion of love, which then responds ever more significantly to quality. "Growth" is this response to quality. The aesthetic condition, like a rich garden in which seeds are planted, does no more than serve as an instrument of growth. Otherwise, there are only sporadic flowerings as conditions fall right by chance. And so we have the occasional gardens of history, usually by a mixture of luck with creative design, which produced such "geniuses" as Homer, Plato, Gerbert, Petrarch, Shakespeare, and Michelangelo. This aesthetic selection and ordering of qualities in the direction of life-ends, so that it may spontaneously take root and sprout, is the responsibility of our artist-philosophers, whether their realms encompass science, craft, family, law, literature, art, politics, education, or any of the other key institutions of civilization. However, the job of tackling the chaos of ignorance and intransigence in order to shape a garden of wisdom does not call out for the timid, nor is it taken on without ideals to light the way.

Nor is "order out of chaos" some handy phrase meant to save shallow critics the trouble and time of thinking things out. It refers to the reshaping of life according to qualities, values, and ideals that don't even exist for utilitarians and their ilk. Order, whether that of a single person or a corporate person, brings meaning out of chaos by stabilizing what is, while simultaneously developing the possibility for further enhancement through the objective experience of ordered quality. This is called maturation, or simply growth.

On the other hand, one of the consequences of disorder is wasted capacity. If Audrey, this silly character, were merely a bimbo drafted in the most shallow of tones, then it could have been humorous to have her gobbled by that nasty plant. Who would have cared? But the preview audience that hated the ending, where innocent Audrey is murdered and that damned plant triumphs, and felt what I felt. Why destroy someone of value for no reason? What delight is there in blighted promise? This is why I was relieved when they didn't kill Audrey. Because, even though she doesn't exist, she helps light my path and I love her. Through her designed and living quality, Audrey gives

Lovely Audrey

hope of reshaping chaos into something better.

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