The Performer

for Zoë

There is a part of me – a small part, but it's there – that has long fantasized about being a standup comedian. (I know I am not alone in this.) I also know I would be a very bad standup comedian -- nobutseriously, ladies and germs, I wanna tell you, take my wife, please, when she sits around the house, she literally just flew in from Vegas, and boy are my arms -- just as I know I would be a very bad actor (which I have also sometimes fantasized about). The few times I have had occasion to be onstage, or in front of an audience – any audience – an unaccountable hamminess takes over. I think it all goes back to sixth-grade graduation, when I played Petruchio in The Taming of the Shrew. (Not the whole play, of course – just an excerpt from one scene, II.i.168 ff., with Mary Reitzel as Kate.) That was when the unaccountable ham first appeared, and I suddenly kissed Mary onstage -- which certainly wasn't in the "working script" we were using, and which she wasn't at all pleased about. But we were graduating that day, so luckily I was outta there. If not, my shins would probably have been kicked to ribbons. (We were at the age where girls kicked boys in the shins. In sixth grade, my shins got it pretty bad. Sometimes I came home with them looking like the bark of a tree. But that's another story.) Anyway, the

moms in the audience were quite amused by my performance, even if Mary Reitzel wasn't. (And that had been my primary purpose all along -- to amuse the moms.)

Sixth-grade graduation paved the way for hamming it up in later youth. Dubious highlights included a two-night run, in boarding school, of a stage adaptation of Salinger's Franny and Zooey, in which I played Zooey, and packed the audience with my friends on the first night, inserting ad-libbed jokes into the script that had them roaring, but basically ruined the production. (The second night, when my friends were no longer in attendance, was less successful.) And, the year after college, a five-minute routine at a small club on Manhattan's Upper West Side, where I performed the drum solo to "In-A-Godda-Da-Vida" through my nose and mouth. (You sort of had to be there.) The audience that night was thin. I did my best to pack that one, too -- but this didn't turn out so well. Only three people showed up: a friend, my grandmother Cissie, and her housekeeper, Florence. Cissie and Florence were dressed to the nines.

And that was the end of my stage career; though I remain something of a vicarious comedian, particularly responsive to the occupational vulnerability of the standup comic – especially the one with little or no talent. At the core of my response, I think – beneath the squirm of embarrassment for the performer, and the dim, vestigial flicker of my own thwarted ambitions,

such as they were – is a little silent prayer of gratitude and relief: there but for the grace of God go I.

I mention all this because I recently saw a movie on Netflix – part of the coronavirus bingeing my wife Julie and I have been doing lately – that had an unexpected effect on me, and brought back memories of my flirtations with Thalia. The movie is "Jim and Andy: The Great Beyond" (2017). It's a backstage documentary about Jim Carrey's performance as Andy Kaufman in the biopic "Man on the Moon" (1999). Though calling the latter a "biopic" is about as misleading as calling the former a "documentary". Both movies – directed by Miloš Forman and Chris Smith, respectively – are sui generis: unclassifiable, genre-bending, peerless. And much the same could be said of the two talents they feature. But "talents" doesn't get it quite right, either: these two movies are studies of genius -- and I don't employ the term lightly. The films portray two artists with exceptional gifts, and resonate in the imagination long after they are over. Or so, at least, it has been for me. I saw "Man on the Moon" when it first came out, or shortly thereafter; "Jim and Andy" I saw for the first time last week. I was stunned by it, so I watched "Man on the Moon" again – and then had to watch "Jim and Andy" again, too. (And I have a feeling not for the last time.)

The story of the "Jim and Andy" can be briefly told. During the shooting of "Man on the Moon", Jim Carrey got so deep into the part of Andy Kaufman (including Kaufman doing the mythic and supremely obnoxious lounge singer Tony Clifton, whose unspeakably wretched rendition of "I Gotta Be Me" -- dubiously immortalized by Sammy Davis Jr. -- serves as a sort of climax for "Jim and Andy") that he couldn't get out of it. Nor did he particularly want to. The film is a chronicle of Carrey's possession by the spirit of Kaufman. It touched all sorts of nerves for me, and I can't get it out of my mind. It's about obsession, transgression, comedy, genius, madness, Hollywood, success, failure, identity, performance. (To name but a few.) On a more personal note, it has shown me what I myself could never have accomplished in the field of comedy, and also (somewhat contradictorily, I realize) what I chickened out from even attempting. You see, the Carrey/Kaufman/Clifton triad recalls an earlier avatar of mine, "The Performer", that I have never quite relinquished, all rational career accommodations to the contrary notwithstanding. The film speaks to me from – well, yes, The Great Beyond of comic immortality, and tells me, agonizingly and ecstatically, of The Daring required to achieve it.

I remember reading somewhere an account by a PhD candidate in nuclear physics at Cal Tech, who happened to have had Richard Feynman, one of the greatest particle physicists of the 20th

century, on his doctoral committee. At his oral exam, the PhD candidate was given two questions by Feynman: one that he was able to answer quite easily, and one that he found it impossible to answer at all. After the exam – which he passed – the candidate realized what Feynman had been doing. The great physicist had not meant to quash or demoralize him, but only to demarcate for him the boundaries of his knowledge, and perhaps also of his capabilities -- a realistic sense of which would be necessary if he were to have a successful scientific career. Feynman had not acted invidiously, but instructively, and the candidate had received it as such. Watching "Jim and Andy" made me feel a little bit as I imagine the PhD candidate must have felt: a master – or masters, in my case -- had given me a glimpse of a realm I would never attain to, but only wonder at from afar.

Of course, I was never a serious candidate for a stage career of any sort. My standup comedian avatar had only ever been strictly notional – a wistful vision of an alternative self. But it was instructive to me, too, to receive a lesson from the masters. And not only instructive, but salutary as well – as the bracing example of genius always should be: allowing us to dispel our illusions, and come to know ourselves better, and more truly. I am old enough now to be able to accept the lesson

with what I like to think is a measure of chastened grace and humility.

At the ripening age of 66 – "Route 66", I call it on my cheerier days – I have begun to be aware of something that Julie and I refer to as my "Voluntary Tourette's Syndrome." This tendency seems to be driven by two contradictory things: the need to transgress and the fear of transgressing. Here the worry of taking it too far (and by "it" I mean nothing more than my particular brand of humor) sits uneasily with the sense that I have never taken it far enough – that I have always stopped short of "breaking through", whatever that may mean. Andy Kaufman and Tony Clifton, on the other hand – and Jim Carrey as both of them – seem to epitomize the ultimate triumph, and vindication, of taking it too far – and of emerging, by virtue of their true belief, on the other side, uncontested and supreme, regnant in the realms of comic gold. They have attained to The Great Beyond. It may be truly said of them that They Dared. They dared to go where no comedian had gone before; they remained true to their vision; and they reaped the rewards. They expanded and enriched our idea of the genre. And they have transcended it. As far as I'm concerned, Kaufman's epitaph (and maybe Clifton's too – though probably not, since the latter, being mythical, is also immortal: a deity of Badness) reads simply: "He Dared". And to the Daring go the palms.

My own daring, such as it is, goes only so far as my "Voluntary Tourette's Syndrome", which urges me to try out, mostly just on Julie, a few characters that I am basically afraid to perform for more than a few seconds at a time, because of the offense they may cause: a humble East Indian ("It's not the heat, it's the humility"); an insinuatingly racist Southern "cracker" named Clem; and a super-potent Reggae Rastaman, no name assigned. The politically incorrecter, the better. What seems to be at stake for me in these apparently irresistible Tourettian sallies is the testing, and the overstepping (but just for a moment), of the bounds of my otherwise bona fide liberal credentials. My primary intention – or so it would seem – is to make people laugh; the problem is, the jokes and their characters are not that funny. Perhaps they are not funny at all. In any case, they make Julie uneasy. I know they make her uneasy – and yet I cannot stop.

I think uneasiness is of the essence here. It's part of the Tourettian transgressiveness: the more forbidden, the more tempting -- and the Tourettian transgressor, you see, is unable to resist temptation. A certain self-destructiveness is even part of it. The issue of self-destructiveness has been somewhat neglected, as far as I can tell, by those who would to understand the nature of Thalia, at least in her standup incarnation. The urge for self-exposure, for self-revelation (I

know they are not the same thing; but they are related) – even through an adopted persona; especially through an adopted persona – and also the possibility of totally flopping onstage (whence the ignominy of "flop sweat") – all these dangers are intimately connected to The Daring, which is undergone in the knowledge of possible onstage annihilation. I am aware that recognizing this possibility is not the same as self-destructiveness; but they are related, too. The willingness to risk it, to Dare it in public must surely involve some degree of self-destructiveness; otherwise there would be no applause, and no sense of triumph, at the successful execution (I use the term advisedly) of one's part. There is always at least a touch of self-destructiveness in the sacrifice of your (offstage) safety and security for the prospect of – what, exactly? Not fame, I don't think -- the vast majority of standup comedians never become famous (though no doubt many, if not most, hope to be) -- nor even a more modest renown (the same limitation and qualifications apply). How about the reward of just plain laughter? The universal sweet affirmation of laughter, which means also recognition and acceptance – if only momentary. The knowledge that you have gotten through to someone – to many, maybe – and that they have accepted your version of the truth. For comedy is worth nothing without the truth: the truth of the human condition, if that is not too grand-sounding. Or if it is,

then how about this: the truth of Andy's answer (as voiced by Jim), upon waking in the middle of the night, with a reply to the question, What do people want? "People just want to be free from concern." And if it's you up there onstage, putting yourself on the line, and not them – if it's you risking the flop sweat, not them – then they are purged, in Aristotelian terms, of the pity and fear of their human condition, and they are grateful to you for that, and for taking the burden upon yourself. You have freed them, temporarily, from their concerns. You have enabled them to rest easy in themselves, at least for the moment. And that is no small gift. Why shouldn't they applaud you? Why shouldn't they be relieved?

Laughter frees from concern: that was Andy Kaufman's rediscovery of Aristotle's universal truth about the theatrical art. But the laughter produced by Andy's visionary comedy was of a special sort: the laughter of innocence, of blandness, and of badness. Innocence and blandness and badness, by turns, and sometimes together. The winning, clueless innocence of Foreign Man. The blandness of the Mighty Mouse routine, and the nervous hesitancy of the innocent, diffident "Andy" character who offered it up, to the accompaniment of the shitty little portable record player. The blandness – and the blamelessness, the sublime, innocent blamelessness! – of milk and cookies, for which he took the whole audience out in school buses, after the

Carnegie Hall performance. This insistence on preserving his childish, innocent blandness was surely at the center of Kaufman's genius. (As his determination to persist in the blandness was part of his originality.) And let us not forget the badness. The unremitting badness of his reading, out loud, in a bogus British accent, The Great Gatsby in its entirety, for hours and hours. And the transcendent badness – the supreme and triumphant badness of the seemingly indestructible Tony Clifton, a hero of our time if there ever was one, execrable lounge singer and practical jokester par excellence. And not just the badness of it all, but the Daring of the Badness, the Daring not just to be bad, but to be the worst. And the unapologeticness, too: the almost Heideggerian unapologeticness (if that is not too much; and if it is, let it be more!) of his very Being-in-Badness: the dogged pursual of what so isn't funny until it is, finally, hilarious. A kind of alchemical transformation of comedic leadenness into gold. And how does that work? Through The Daring. For all is possible through The Daring. The Daring causes The Badness to emerge into the realm of the sublime – the more-than-funny, the visionary, the transcendent. The Great Beyond.

Full disclosure: My first wife, Diane, knew Andy Kaufman. She went to high school with him. He was in her class at Great Neck North, and was said (by her) to have had a crush on her.

(And I believe it. I would have had a crush on her, too. It was past the age where I would have gotten kicked in the shins for it. Besides, Diane was never the type to kick boys in the shins.) Some time later, she was also in the milk-and-cookies brigade when he played at Carnegie Hall. And a few years after that, when she'd moved to L.A., he took her out to a water slide. It was a very hot day, and after the slide, he decided he needed to meditate in the car for 45 minutes (air conditioner running) while Diane waited outside. Then he took her for a lobster dinner. Clueless, self-centered, generous – classic Kaufman. She forgave him, apparently; she always retold the story with a fond indulgence.

Andy and Diane both died of cancer at an early age – he (35) considerably younger than she (54). So I guess you could say I have kind of a personal interest in the art and life of Andy Kaufman. He loved my wife before I knew her. And I can't help wondering… Did he see in her some of the same things that I saw? Her hint of mystery? Her soulfulness? Her touch of madness (not unlike himself)? Diane had been diagnosed with schizophrenia as an adolescent; but with the help of the right medication, she made a virtually complete recovery. And did he notice also her slight resemblance to a fairy woodland creature, delicate and vaguely bewitched? Yet despite her "magical" qualities, she also had an inalienable (and hard-won)

practicality and level-headedness, which sat so unexpectedly well with the somewhat pixilated aspects. Then again, maybe this really so unexpected after all: with what she had to deal with (she was on strong anti-psychotic meds as long as I knew her), she had to be practical and level-headed to survive. He had known her both before and after her illness, and she had touched his heart. So Andy and I were compatriots, of a sort.

And now Diane is gone, and I love Julie. And perform for her, too, some of the same dumb routines that worked with Diane. (Another sign of my relative poverty of comic invention.) But there is one character of mine I have forgotten to mention. Perhaps the least funny of all. The most tedious. The most insufferable. And the closest, I am afraid, to the truth. He is an academic elitist of the most exacting kind, exquisitely sensitive to gradations of quality, distinctions of excellence. He is continually talking of "the best, the very best, and only the best". (Imagine a travesty of Matthew Arnold, "the best that is known and thought in the world", though without the poet's art and soul.) In truth, this character – who has no name, either; I have never thought of giving him a name; though perhaps only because, if he had one, it could only be my own) – has no art at all, and the soul of a bureaucrat, or a taxonomist, alive only to questions of caliber and credential: the kind of degree you possess, and where it's from. A

thoroughly obnoxious type, and one Julie and I would instinctively shrink from, as surely as we would shrink from the likes of a Tony Clifton. More surely, actually – much more. For Tony Clifton at least has humanity – albeit of a sort that the late drama critic Kenneth Tynan would have called (in fact did call, describing Doc Severinson's jacket, in a New Yorker Profile of Johnny Carson) "ragingly vulgar". My dessicated academic snob could do with a little raging vulgarity; it would put some blood in his veins, instead of the ice water that flows there (albeit from "one of the very best of natural sources").

Why have I created such a character for myself? Why, if not because "there but for the grace of God go I"? I am to this academic elitist, perhaps, as Andy Kaufman was to Tony Clifton. Which is to say, he represents a nightmare vision of what I might have become. Which is also to say, he stands for my fear of what I am. Kaufman feared the very idea of the vulgar, talentless entertainer (though he was also fascinated by him), so he created a travesty of one in the flesh. I abhor the idea of the hyper-refined, elitist academic – but only because I hold in high regard the fine distinctions of excellence of which he is the travesty. "That thou art," the famous Vedic hymn goes – and it goes for the performer in us, too. That which we fear and abhor is also us. We wouldn't feel so strongly if it wasn't. And you have to feel it strongly to perform it. There is a little

bit of Tony Clifton in all of us; that is why he is so mythical – and was so indispensable for Andy. I would never claim the same status for my pedant with the soul of a bureaucrat; he has hardly ascended to the level of Cliftonian inspiration. But he is obnoxious enough for my purposes.

There is a scene off set in "Jim and Andy" where Jim suddenly begins to morph into Tony. His lower lip folds back characteristically, his neck thrusts forward on its own (the bizarre rubber neck prosthesis that Jim wears as Tony is a whole other matter, and alone worth the price of a Netflix subscription), the grating voice now begins to snarl. A p.a. who witnesses the transformation cries, "No! No! Tell Tony to go away!" But it's too late: Tony has arrived, and Jim will not get rid of him. He refuses to get rid of him. Which is to say, he dares to not get rid of him. And that's the biggest difference between us. Despite my seemingly irresistible, Tourettian urge to invoke my characters, I get rid of them as soon as I sense I've gone too far. Jim and Andy don't do this. They take it to the limit, and farther. They dare to go too far. And in their Daring, they break through -- into The Great Beyond.