

Tragedy and Farce

by Bill Herbst

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The frequently cited quote, "*History repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce,*" was uttered by (or at least attributed to) no less a luminary than that infamous German provocateur, Karl Marx. We might say about this quote that what begins as a thoughtful, accurate, and somewhat irreverent pronouncement ends up as a meme well-suited in tone and brevity for the Twitterverse.

We've reached a point in the vainglorious history of America and modern civilization where the cascade of ongoing, routine, and utterly predictable tragedies are rapidly coalescing and transforming into side-splitting farces. Sense has morphed into nonsense. How is one — or, in this case, me — to offer any serious commentary about the painful foolishness of humans and society when damn near everything that parades across our screens has become not just equivalent to but the epitome of a mordant stand-up comedy routine. I can hardly satirize what is already absurdist caricature from the get-go, especially when all that's left to say is, "*You can't make up this shit.*" But, of course, we *can* make it up, and we do.

Everything we see on our screens — televisions, desktop monitors, laptops, tablets, and smart phones (which are increasingly the predominant and sometimes exclusive ways we experience the outer world that we glibly refer to as "reality") — is fiction. Finally, all video is make-believe story-telling. Like Grimm Fairy Tales and other bedtime stories told to children to enthrall and terrify them before they toddle off into actual Dream Land, except that now it's less about the monsters of myth and legend and more about culture war distractions. We've traded ghosts and goblins for new monsters. Whichever "team" we're on — whether Left or Right, liberal or conservative, Democrat-Republican, red state or blue state — the monsters are those on the other team.

As I'm writing this on my Mac, my 43" flat-screen LCD display 4K Ultra-HD Toshiba Fire TV (a low-end, el cheapo television by current standards) is streaming an episode of Bonanza from its second season in 1960 on The Film Detective Channel via Sling TV. The once-popular show is bathed in fake-Old-West sepia-toned and over-saturated colors, with sets that are supposed to represent Virginia City, Montana, and the surrounding environs, but which scream Hollywood studio back lots. All myth, with precious little actual history.

Why am I watching (although I'm not really "watching") a 60-year-old TV show that was pretty silly when it first aired, and is even more ludicrous these days? Because it's preferable to being subjected to Morning Joe on MSNBC. Why hell, even as fictional characters in an ersatz western with weird family symbolism, Daddy Ben Cartwright, cool Adam, Big Hoss, and Little Joe are probably closer to sane reality than Joe Scarborough ever was on his best day.

And though I'm interested in political issues — why Americans who are hurting can't get even small stimulus relief checks, a \$15 per hour minimum wage, single-payer health care, even a modest tax on the ultra-wealthy, or apparently anything else that contains a modicum of common sense concern for the well-being of ordinary people or the preservation of an extraordinary planet — I simply can't stomach the twisted logic, centrist faux-liberal narratives, and general goofiness of Morning Joe (or any other "political journalism" on MSNBC, CNN, or PBS) that is offered up by our corporate masters with a straight face as "news." As oddly improbable as it may seem, I'll take Bonanza every time. At least with Bonanza, the make-believe story-telling is out front.

Not so with FOX News, MSNBC, or Congress, for that matter. In the mainstream media and the hallowed halls of presumed political power, fiction is paraded as if it were reality. And it's not even good fiction. Why is this so? Because the system we've built won't allow it. Like Humpty Dumpty, it's broken and can't be fixed, not by all the king's horses or all the king's men. Too many people are paid handsomely to justify and support it as it is, just as Lorne Green and Michael Landon were back when doing so seemed innocent and OK. Joe Scarborough and everyone else on Morning Joe are, I presume, among those who enjoy their rewards. Defenders of the Realm. Celebrities. Performers who keep us entertained and distracted from the suffering. Many of them, I'm sure, feel that they're doing the right thing. From where I sit, though, it looks crazy as hell.

This is how the American Empire dies — as tragedy devolving into farce. Slow at first and then increasingly fast. It's been that way with the decline and fall of empires since the dawn of civilization. Turns out that America isn't so "exceptional" after all.

Some people — in fact, many — bemoan how crazy America has become. But the uncomfortable truth is that we were always crazy. Most Americans just mistook it as perfectly OK for two centuries and accepted it as normal. It's as if we're finally noticing how truly insane we are. The mask is coming off as our troubles lift the veil, revealing not so much the underlying ugliness as the unbelievable silliness. America is like the old quote about show business attributed in one form or another to various former celebrities from the 1940s, including concert pianist and curmudgeonly wit Oscar Levant, writer/actor Ed Gardner, and comedian Henry Morgan: *"Strip away the phony tinsel of Hollywood, and you find the real tinsel underneath."* Rim shot.

I swear, I don't know whether to laugh or cry. With each passing week, the oceanic depth and breadth of our pretentious folly becomes more obvious. As journalist and social critic Chris Hedges says, the dry tinder of discontent and mistrust is piling up. All it will take is a seemingly insignificant spark to ignite that tinder into major revolt. We just don't know what form the spark will take, when it will occur, what kind of rebellion will be fomented, nor the outcome. But it's coming.

Is it any wonder that so many people take refuge from our political and cultural madness by focusing on their families and children? As nutty and painful as families too often are, they're still preferable to many folks over the darker and more outrageous cruelty of society-at-large. While families aren't as effective a pain-killer as Oxycontin, they don't require a prescription. And if family isn't attractive or available, we look for some other buffer against the insanity. Jobs, hobbies, tech toys, celebrity nonsense — any way we can find to escape the PTSD-inducing trauma of modern life. So, one way or another, people retreat, as do I, into our own private monasteries, hoping to find relief — someplace to exist that isn't so goddamned crazy that it's nausea-producing.

Readers might say, "*Gee, Bill, you've really gone 'round the bend.*" Some, no doubt, will think that. That doesn't mean that I'm wrong. It means that their protective sanctuaries of, well, maybe not outright faith, hope, and optimism, but at least a little peace of mind — in whatever form they've found or created their shelter against the storm — are more effective than mine. They are better insulated, shielded a bit more from the outrageous slings and arrows of the Big World Three-Ring Circus than I am.

Do I feel guilty about the possibility of disturbing others with the way I write? Not particularly. I'm fairly certain that rather than being perturbed, they'll react if at all simply with the assumption, whether momentary or permanent, that I have indeed "gone 'round the bend." If they're even mildly compassionate, they might feel sad for me, and they'll probably stop reading what I write.

I don't take offense at that, in part because I tell myself that a significant aspect of whatever maturity I've achieved is the ability to face unpleasant realities without much flinching or denial. I'm not in any way suggesting that optimism is a sign of immaturity, just that pessimism isn't either. Optimism and pessimism tend to be qualities coded into our temperaments more than factors of choice or circumstance. If people want optimistic reinforcement or reassurance and don't cotton to my view of things, that's OK.

Also, those more inclined toward hope aren't the people I write for. However they've achieved their cheerful attitude, people who are well-insulated from the madness are not my natural audience. I have neither the wish nor the intention to challenge or provoke them, although I doubt that I could even if I wanted to. No, I write primarily for myself, but also for those people who, like me, and for

whatever reasons, cannot shut out the tragedy and farce of where we are — as individuals, as families, as a country, and as a species. They get on with their lives and cope as best they can, of course, but they're always aware that there's Trouble in Paradise. I write these weekly commentaries to remind us that we are not alone.

Sometimes that helps me get through another day at the asylum. If it helps you too, that's lovely. If not, so be it. Look elsewhere. Finally, this is just me saying, as now-departed singer/songwriter John Prine penned in his uniquely wistful and poignant everyman style on his 1971 self-titled debut album:

"Hello in there. Hello."

[Note: During the first wave of the pandemic, John Prine died in April 2020 at the age of 73 from complications caused by CoronaVirus. The successful country-folk recording artist and performing singer had survived cancer twice, but the CoronaVirus got him. Prine's wife Fiona publicly blamed Donald Trump for her husband's death. I wonder how relatives of the other half million pandemic dead feel...]