

"A SMILE AND A SHOESHINE"

by

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Why
Shoeshine

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Dr. Joseph B. Baldwin burst into Playwriting 131, threw down his papers, and started ranting about all the mail he is suddenly getting from funeral homes.

Joe is always quick to offer a smile and the story of his life. He's a sixty-four-year-old writer, with hunched shoulders from typing too many plays, and silvery-white hair that is never combed in the back. That, I would wager, is the main theme in his life story; getting the front part ~~of~~ really neat, then forgetting about the mess in back. Don't think Joe isn't a beautiful man. He's tall and doesn't dress in dowdy, old-man-polyester that killed my grandfather. ~~Sometimes, his shoes don't match, but he keeps on smiling.~~ ^{? True?}

There are times when Joe thinks he's failed. Not as a father, or a teacher, but an artist. ~~He feels he belongs in an upper league with Williams and Miller.~~ ^{is work} No one can blame him for believing in himself.

NOT CLEAR THOUGHT

He sprouted from the hills of Tennessee, and later developed his Southern vernacular in Texas at Austin. Today, his voice is hushed by a life-long friendship with cigarettes, but his husky bass can still caress words into a thundering melody.

Each class period is a chapter in Joe's life. There are a lot of students that bitch about how boring his class is, and others that simply don't care and sleep. The magic of the class is ~~not in the study of one acts,~~

^{not} the importance of one-acts, but the importance that playwriting has had on Joe's life.

~~but the importance of~~

are important to Joe? — and the students²?

~~but listening to the things that make up Joe's life.~~ We see an ancient's view on life, and he paints history with his tongue *in his plays.*

As a high school boy, Joe was editor of the best school newspaper in the land. He went on to college, and edited Walter Cronkite's work. He burned out on journalism, so he decided to take a break and enter the military.

He was an officer. Joe says he never could get real mean and tough with his men. I picture him smiling and winking at a reprimanded soldier, as if to show he wasn't too pissed. Joe was a Benjamin Franklin Pierce, before Alan Alda made him popular.

My favorite chapter⁶ was when Joe told about his trip to the Chicago Museum of Art. He went straight to the paintings, looked both ways, and fingered up a Rembrandt. He later touched a Van Gogh for love.

Joe is older now, and the back of his head is becoming harder to keep neat, but the smile still lingers. He became a playwright and a teacher. He's taught for years, and always had⁵ a new idea in the typewriter. None of his plays have become a Broadway hit. That's all Joe ever wanted; to have a shot at 44th street. In class, Joe speaks of Williams, Euripides, Shaw and Simon in bright ⁾ and clear tones. When he talks about his own plays, it's only a sentence. No titles. No characters. No plot. Joe thinks he'd be advertising if he told in class about his work.

~~We~~ ~~walked~~ walked

I asked to read one of his plays. He ~~led me to~~ ^{and he gave his} his office, ~~to give me~~ the show that made it off, off, Broadway. His office is small, and he hates the size, comparing it to a hall closet. The place is crammed with a huge desk and books hang onto each other from wall-to-wall shelves. His office smells of bitter coffee and stale smoke. I sat down on his pink couch and a gust of smoke rose from the cushions. Joe reached into a cabinet the color of an afternoon shadow, and handed me "A Deed From The King of Spain." He sat down behind the mammoth desk and sparked another tobacco stick. For the first time, I saw up-close, that famous, cavernous smile. His bottom teeth are brown and chipped, his lips are a faded rose and cracked. His smile stopped being cartoon. Now, it was real, and suddenly alive. The mouth carefully allowed the smoke to escape, while he spoke of his play. Joe told me that he keeps typing and sending out his work, but all that doesn't add up to much when there's no stage magic to back up the years of work. 1966 was when the "Deed" play was done, and it has been almost eighteen years since a touch of magic nudged Joe Baldwin. The play is honest, touching, and enticing. Joe turned his back on me and went to the window. His shoulders shuddered and he closed his eyes. He seemed to be shaking off a memory. He took another draw on his cigarette and looked down at the street.

I think Joe thinks himself a failure, because he didn't

have the guts. The guts to get mean. Mean enough to stop smiling. Joe doesn't like to hurt people's feelings, or have someone stop smiling back. When a student shouts in the hall, or a contractor drills cement, he looks at them, smiles, and quietly closes the door. I'm certain that if someone cut in front of him in the grocery line, Joe would smile and not say a word. If Joe is that kind, how the hell can he stomp his feet in a producer's office demanding his play be done? I can't see Joe demanding much more than a fair shake. Be it not him to try and take away another's chance. Joe plays fair. I'd shove and shout and punch if I thought I might get my plays on stage. I'd stab and maul if I could get an extra dollar. That's where Joe touches me. Through his criticism of my work, I learn to make my work do my shouting. He teaches me to punch the producer in the face with a strong opening scene. That's why I don't accept his notion that he has failed. When Joe helps me get better and kinder...he succeeds. He loves to quote from Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman." Joe says, "He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back-- that's an earthquake." Joe taught me how to smile. Joe Baldwin is a success, because he allows himself the distance to keep smiling about his failures. And, when there's a man around that smiles, your problems don't amount to much more than a frown. He has success with himself and that is all that really matters in the end anyway.

Even though Joe isn't a huge success

Playwriting 131, wasn't about learning to write plays. Joe taught us about luck, life, and his hope. Next semester, he'll take partial retirement and teach one class. In his free time, Joe told me that he plans to paint. He always wanted to try, and he plans to paint the land. I can see Joe sitting on his porch, with paints, brushes, and easel, painting the scenes he wrote about so beautifully. He'll also get more funeral home mail and probably will kick their asses for interrupting his painting. Joe is a success, because he is free to live his life with a smile, and a paint brush. I'll always remember Dr. Joseph B. Baldwin as the man who touched a Van Gogh for love⁶⁾ and who touched me, with his smile.