

“In Joy and Bliss to Be Me By”: How Gene Was in London

By Tim Slover

This essay written by a playwright and colleague of England’s shares experiences and perspectives gained in eight years of leading a theatre study abroad program in London together. It appeared in the tribute issue *Sunstone* published shortly after England’s passing.

Originally published: *Sunstone* 121 (January 2002): 50–52.

I WAS A seven-year-old living in Stuttgart, Germany, when John F. Kennedy died. My family and I heard the news as we were driving to a Church event. The outpouring of heartfelt sympathy and genuine grief on the part of the German people taught me that he had been a great man, that something of inestimable value had gone out of the world when he had left it. I was at elementary school in Provo when I heard of the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. In those unreconstructed days before political correctness, some children, mimicking the feelings of their parents, I suppose, expressed glee over that death and then, later, disgust that television stations would carry his funeral. I did not know much about Dr. King then. Only later did I learn enough to mourn his death at such a young age, a flame snuffed out with so much candle left to burn. From then, it has gone on and on, faster and faster, the deaths of those irreplaceable people from whom I have drawn personal strength. And now Gene. For me, for awhile, an island of time was created by Gene’s death, closer to me by far than any of the other irreplaceable people whose lives I had admired. That island stayed intact for awhile, uneroded by the streams of death running on either shore: deaths, thousands of deaths, in New York and Washington, DC, in Afghanistan, and around the world. Those deaths of people I will never know on this side of the veil were, for a time, only an obscene echo of the one death of the one man that I knew well.

I want to move to a happier theme: my friend and colleague, Gene England, as I knew him in London. Each year from 1992 through 2000, Gene and I took from twenty-five to fifty students to London on a theatre study abroad program. With us always went two other of the England family: wife, Charlotte, who functioned as art history teacher, driver, cook, and counselor; and daughter Jane, who took the role of teaching assistant and cultural affairs director. My wife, Mary, generally came for one or two weeks to gladden my heart, and those were the weeks when the Englands and Slovers had their chief adventures. We were all to be together again in London in the spring of 2001, but of course, that was not to be.

Gene loved England. I never knew him to be unhappy there. He grabbed every

opportunity and possibility with both hands and then opened them to share with the rest of us. He loved leading our student groups to the National Theatre, outrunning all of us across the footbridge which spans the Thames from Westminster to the South Bank. He loved the plays, especially the difficult and dangerous ones; he loved “improving” his seating position in the theatre by sneaking down closer to the stage once the plays had started and the ushers were less attentive; he loved clapping so loudly at the end of performances that it frequently caught the attention of the cast onstage. Most of all, he loved talking to his students about the plays afterwards, soliciting their ideas, setting them into a moral and intellectual context. This happened, of course, formally in the classroom, but he used every venue to teach.

He also used his uncanny instant organization to create firesides, get-togethers at flats, and excursions to lectures and exhibitions around town. He was tireless—and, at times, tiring: on one memorable day, he got Charlotte and various other visiting English students up in the middle of the night in London to catch a taxi, a train, and another taxi to see an exhibition of Vermeer paintings in Paris and then retrace the same course to get back to London—all in one day. While others slept, he graded student papers. And Jane and I loved to catch his act on the bus bringing us all into town on our first day. The rest of us blitzed by jetlag, the students struggling to stay awake, Gene would grab the bus microphone and do an ecstatic running commentary all the way from Gatwick Airport. “Look, you guys!” he’d erupt into the microphone, “the yellow flowers in those fields over there produce rapeseed oil! And over there,” he’d burst out, “those are English cows!”

Each year in London, he taught a Shakespeare course, but each year it was different because he drew his curriculum from the plays being staged that spring. As all who knew him know, he loved Shakespeare “this side idolatry,” and I observed the wrestle he had on the years when two particular plays were staged and he duly put them on his syllabus: *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Many, among them prominent and respected critics, find in those two plays evidence of Tudor racism and sexism to which Shakespeare was not immune. This attribution, I believe, actually caused Gene physical pain. And so, because the Bard he knew was neither racist nor sexist, he spent much effort in the classroom, on buses, in restaurants—once with me in a public bathroom—expounding his theories that exculpated Shakespeare from the opprobrium. “When Katherina gives the speech submitting to her husband at the end of *Shrew*,” he’d say, “Shakespeare is really telling us that she isn’t submitting; it’s all been arranged with Petruchio. It’s a kind of sly joke between them.” In the end, I believed him. For me, Gene’s Shakespeare is the best Shakespeare of all: the tolerant genius who is a projection of himself, the Shakespeare I put into my play, *March Tale*.

King Lear he believed to be the best play ever written. As he taught it, he expounded the idea about Shakespeare which appeals to me most: characters such as Edgar and Cordelia construct tests, experiences which are painful but necessary for other characters to undergo to be redeemed. The catalyst for these tests is always deep love felt for the redemptive candidates.

And that, of course, was the strategy Gene employed on Study Abroad: plays

served as testing experiences for students. Some of those experiences were cognitively discombobulating, but in the context of guided discussions, students emerged from the theatre, Gene felt, closer to redemption. Plays served as a window on the larger world, giving students a chance to witness expert renderings of the full kaleidoscope of the human condition. It was education of the whole man, with theatre as the textbook.

AND NOW, AN anecdote which demonstrates the author of *Making Peace* in action. One night, Gene, Charlotte, their daughters Jennifer and Rebecca, and I went to hear a folk singer at a pub in the northern London suburb of High Barnet. The singing went late, and the tube came later. It was almost midnight, close-down hour for the London Underground, when we found ourselves alone in a car, except for two Scandinavian boys of deacon age. As the train eased into a station on the way back toward South Kensington, two young men entered the car, made surly by drink. None of us noticed at first, but raised voices eventually caught our attention, and we looked over to see these men beating the boys, who were overmatched and offering no defense. Now, I don't think Gene had ever been in an adult fight before. I know I hadn't. But obviously we had to do something. And so, true to our profession, we rose as one and lectured. Gene said fierce and menacing things like, "Here, now, stop that, you two" and "This is no way to act." I echoed his sentiments bravely.

When the men turned to us, we must have seemed pretty comical opponents, two academics with worried looks who didn't know what to do with their hands. The Scandinavian boys, one bleeding from the face, bolted past us and through the door into the next car, and that left us to confront their assailants. One broke the bottle he had been drinking from, and it was only luck that it shattered completely, leaving him holding only the rim of the neck—not much to lunge with. But lunge they both did, trying to get past us to catch up with their victims. It was an insult really: weren't we as worthy opponents as a couple of thirteen-year-olds? We tried to hold them back as well as life-long non-combatants could—the way fathers hold onto small sons throwing tantrums, kind of grabbing them around the middle, but they brushed past us easily. In the end, it was Jennifer who saved the day. Motherly instinct took over, she told me later. She blocked their way and screamed, "You leave those boys alone!" I was startled, and I wasn't even the one getting screamed at. At that moment, providentially, we were pulling into the next station, and the former fighters, now cowed by Jennifer's maternal fury, lumped out the opening door onto the platform—but not before yelling at Gene, "You better tell your girlfriend to watch it!" That amused Gene: that his daughter had been mistaken for his girlfriend.

THE ENGLAND FLAT in London was always a kind of hotel and transient center. Charlotte filled it with flowers and enormous fruit bowls, and all the family and friends who visited found a warm, if crowded, welcome.

A bureau drawer in the living room of the flat became the Bank of England, where Gene kept all the money for the program, and where, I always suspected, in the dark of moonless nights, he performed the cabalistic rites that he called "creative

financing,” a process by which money would mysteriously multiply to cover all program expenses and loans to impecunious students who, unused to London’s cost of living, had blown all their money on getting things pierced or dyed or braided instead of, say, food. Gene was meticulous about his accounting, and the students were well served by it, but he preferred to keep it on a “don’t-ask-don’t-tell” basis. Only recently have I discovered the extent to which he supplemented the account with the family’s private funds.

Handling finances was but one facet of his role as “Grand Arranger,” the man who made everything happen. Not even counting the many tasks directly involved in setting up and running the program each year, he went out of his way to serve the students, to arrange for the kinds of testing experiences which would lead to their growth and/or pure joy: a lecture by playwright David Hare at Westminster Abbey on the advantages of atheism, bell-ringing at St. Paul’s Cathedral, platform discussions at the National Theatre by leading actors and directors, firesides with LDS political leaders, a presentation on the devastating effects of war at Coventry Cathedral, a trip to the temple (and “beach”) at Brighton, a visit to Warwick Castle, an extra play here, a Bach performance there—even Wimbledon tennis tickets.

Gene and Charlotte and Jane served and served in London, and found such joy in the service that it was infectious, and we all trailed along in their wake, doing little things for each other. As they served, they found love from everyone. Gene, I think, never had a business relationship with anyone in his life, certainly not in London, where he conducted much business. All were his friends, and all came to love him dearly: the father and sons whose buses we hired, the people who cleaned and serviced our flats, ticket-sellers at theatres. He knew all their names and their lives. He had a very special relationship with the wonderful people who leased us flats and, often, classroom space each year. They were deeply affected by his death and were among the first to telephone their condolences to Charlotte.

What was Gene’s secret? How did he engender such love in such a wide variety of people? My observation is that all his relationships in London were completely horizontal: he was, I think, incapable of talking either up or down to people, but always simply across, honestly, heart to heart. That he tended to get the best seats, the lowest prices, the most for his students, was really just a by-product—certainly not an aim—of his reaching out and treating all human beings as valued brothers and sisters.

His relationship with his beloved Charlotte many know and have chronicled. I saw also his unfolding relationship with his daughter Jane who, year after year, worked with us as a teaching assistant and whom we came increasingly to rely on to lead students into cultural experiences. The best of him poured into her soul, I think: his love for England, his urgency to teach and improve the lot of people around him. Is it any wonder that Jane stayed behind in London two years to pursue a master’s degree in third world charitable development at the London School of Economics? Or that, as I write, she is in Vietnam, helping in an aid project? She is her father’s daughter.

I suppose Gene saw upwards of three hundred plays over the years of our study-abroad experiences (not many of them musicals: big West End musicals were his

particular aversion). But among them all, his favorite, about which he has spoken often and written, was a dramatization of the medieval play cycle which tells the story of the world from the fall of Lucifer to the Final Judgment. He first saw this production, called *The Mysteries*, in 1985. It was both mammoth—taking three evenings, or one whole day, to perform—and intimate—performing on a small arena playing space where actors and audience mingled. Gene loved it for its gritty beauty, its utter conviction, and the blend of modernity and antiquity which gave it a timeless quality. Fifteen years later, in the Year of Our Lord 2000, Gene’s last season in London, fifteen months before he left the earth for good, the National Theatre revived *The Mysteries*. On one of our last nights in London that year, after seeing another play, Gene, Charlotte, Jane, and I went around the corner to see the last half-hour or so of the very last performance of the last part of *The Mysteries*. (Gene, a friend of the house manager, naturally, got us in.)

We walked into the crowded playing space just as Jesus and his Father were judging the world. Jesus turned to a section of audience who had unknowingly sat on a bit of stadium seating that he had marked out for damnation. “Ye cursed caitiffs of Cain’s kin.” he said to the startled theatregoers, “that never me comforted in my care, from me flee, in hell to dwell without an end.” By this time, Gene, who knew the drill, had worked himself over to the section of those who were to be saved. Jesus turned to him and smiled. “My blessed bairns on my right hand,” he said. “Your life in liking shall ye lead, in this kingdom that to you is due for your good deed. Heaven shall be your rest, in joy and bliss to be me by.” Gene, I noted from where I stood in tears, beamed beatifically back at him.

© 2010 Eugene England Foundation. All rights reserved.

How to cite this essay: Tim Slover, “‘In Joy and Bliss to Be Near By’: How Gene was in London,” *Sunstone* 121 (January 2002): 50–52.

The Eugene England Foundation expects website users to follow carefully Fair Use of Copyrighted Materials guidelines. Please contact www.eugeneengland.org website administrators for questions or support, to submit or view thoughtful and responsible comments, and to donate to the nonprofit Eugene England Foundation.