

tudes of political factionalism force him to develop survival skills even greater than those acquired under the Nazis.

Ultimately, there is an escape to the West where, now as a highly lauded Shakespeare scholar, he settles down in the university at Stony Brook, New York; but the reverberations of what he has lived through never entirely subside. They condition his outlook and permeate his world view. For Kott, the world will always be a place where the status quo, in an instant, does a backflip; where storm follows calm and order precipitates chaos. This is the quintessential European experience of the early twentieth century and Kott not only describes it, he contains and exemplifies it.

The style of the book is casually devastating. Confronted with the most terrifying circumstances, the eyes in Kott's punch-link visage narrow, a smile plays on his lips, and the author immediately proceeds to objectify his experience. Like Good Soldier Schweik, Kott has the ability to be enmeshed in the most harrowing incidents and emerge unscathed, good humour miraculously intact.

In the last chapters, Kott describes with clinical precision and total lack of sentimentality the five heart attacks that each time almost snuffed out his life. The metabolic terror that assaults his body is the biological equivalent of the totalitarianism that wreaked such havoc on his social self between the 1930s and 1960s. The cardiac arrests emerge like the progeny of Stalin and Hitler, Gomulka and Jaruzelski. They are just as irrational, just as menacing, just as impossible to counter or cope with. The clinical descriptions segue into limpid, utterly sensible contemplations that give the book its solid philosophical anchor.

What always made Kott such a distinctive critic was the way in which he was able to find in the classics, particularly Shakespeare, the living essence of contemporary forces. It was Kott more than anyone else who showed us the connection between historical totalitarianism and contemporary power politics; how the kings anointed and the modern despots shared the same ideologies and techniques of plunder; how the so-called

Grand Mechanism was hatched in the Middle Ages and acquired sophistication right up to the present. What *Still Alive* does is to spell out the experiential base from which those theories were hatched.

It was because Kott lived the kind of life he did that he was able to have the insights he had. What made him an astute critic of Shakespeare was not reading and scholarship but converted perceptions about life's cruelties and absurdities. That is what has always lifted Kott far above his critical colleagues. They were writing exegeses; he was extrapolating from personal traumas and tragedies. What makes *Still Alive* such a compelling read is that from his earliest days right through the rigours of the past sixty years, Kott has always been bristlingly, unquenchably 'alive' and it is the quality of that indigenous liveliness that confers such magnetism to this book.

*Shakespeare Our Contemporary* displays the length and breadth of Jan Kott's intellect and *Still Alive* is a literary microcosm that contains the soul of the man himself.

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Charles Marowitz

## Remembering Lenny Bruce

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On 13 October 2012, Lenny Bruce, had he not accidentally overdosed on narcotics (or committed suicide – the jury is still out on that one), would be eighty-seven years old. It is, of course, a thoroughly incredible notion – like an octogenarian Mozart, a superannuated Janis Joplin, or James Dean signing up for a senior citizen pension. *Poètes maudits*, doomed rock icons, and self-destructive superstars are supposed to die young. Their myth demands it, and we wouldn't have it any other way.

Bruce at forty-one, perched on a toilet bowl with a spike in his right arm and his

last typed words ('conspiracy to interfere with the Fourth Amendment const—') in the barrel of his still humming electric typewriter, died characteristically. He was always associated with toilet humour and throughout the last decade of his life exhausted himself trying to demonstrate that the United States Constitution protected the free speech for which one court after another mercilessly prosecuted him. (The Fourth Amendment, incidentally, protects citizens from 'unreasonable searches and seizures' and, along with the state's First Amendment violations, was as much responsible for his downfall as the cocaine and morphine.)

I met him in 1962 when he came to England for the first time to play at Peter Cook's Soho club, The Establishment. At the press conference, he spotted me among a cluster of journalists and insisted he knew me from somewhere or other – although I insisted I'd never seen him before and, in fact, had been resident in England for the same eight years during which he had come to prominence in clubs in New York and San Francisco. Nevertheless, I certainly knew him by reputation and was flattered to be adopted as a crony.

The opening-night performance was for me cathartic. Lenny was serving up sly, coruscating insights on subjects of which I had been only half conscious growing up on the Lower East Side of New York. He plunged me back to my adolescence – what my adolescence would have been if it had been articulate, probing, unsuppressed, and revelatory.

In the following days *The People's* headline read 'He makes us sick', and the *Daily Sketch* wrote 'It stinks!' Bruce always seemed to inspire short, nauseous epithets – and, of course, if one is billed as a 'sick comic', it goes without saying that the 'healthy reaction' is to express disgust at his performance. Although these kinds of reactions were predictable, neither he nor anyone else was prepared for the tenor of the upbeat reviews. George Melly in the *New Statesman* hailed him as 'the evangelist of the new morality' and compared him to Jonathan Swift. Ken Tynan, referring to the recent success of

*Beyond the Fringe*, said, 'If *Fringe* was a pinprick, Mr Bruce was a bloodbath!' Others followed suit and, in most quarters, the foul-mouthed, dirty-minded Lenny Bruce was vaunted as a moral crusader and front-runner of the new consciousness.

Lenny's opening was a walloping great success, playing as it did to a hand-picked, largely showbiz crowd. After that the 'real people' came to the club and were, on the whole, bored or outraged; occasionally both. There were constant walk-outs – which cut Lenny to the quick, as he couldn't bear flagrant shows of rejection. As the run progressed, reactions became more vituperative. The Establishment was an intimate club and its close confines tended to encourage audience participation. Lots of people got into Lenny's act – hurling first insults, then penies, glasses, and eventually bottles.

This was no longer the idealized British public that Lenny had romanticized when he first stepped off the plane, nor was it the carefully selected cognoscenti that Peter Cook and Nicholas Luard, the club's owners, had gathered for its premiere. This was the stiff-backed, toffee-nosed British public, drawn from the city and the suburbs – the posh anglicized version of American red-necks – and they found Lenny the personification of that same free-ranging 1960s spirit that they had come to fear and loathe. Fistfights were not uncommon. Before leaving the theatre in a huff that would eventually make headlines, actress Siobhan McKenna's escort, resenting slurs on the Irish, bopped Peter Cook on the nose. 'These are Irish hands,' wailed Ms McKenna, 'and they are clean.' 'This is a British face,' retorted Cook, 'and it's bleeding.'

Since everything was grist for Lenny's mill, he took to recording the reactions of the hostile houses and playing them back to subsequent audiences. Expecting 'live entertainment', they often grew hostile at being exposed to endless reels of tape. Lenny (like Krapp, whom he came to resemble in the final days) was an obsessive recordist. On one occasion, 'a nice Jewish couple' from the suburbs came backstage to compliment him on his act. Though they themselves were

sympathetic, they had to point out 'with all due respect' that Lenny was giving offence to certain Jewish members of the audience. Lenny was so regaled by the couple's hypocrisy that he cruelly played the conversation back to the next house, which he naively assumed would be as liberated as he himself – which of course, they were not.

Lenny was fascinated by the British legalization of narcotics and the fact that addicts could simply 'sign on' and receive prescribed doses. He once fantasized for me a British GPs typical prescription: 'Take two aspirins, a half glass of Epsom salts, fifty grams of coke, and an acid suppository.' He was forcibly ejected from two London hotels; once for stopping up the toilet with used spikes and another time for conducting a nocturnal trio of blondes in an original composition, the chorus of which ran 'Please fuck me Lenny' – in three-part harmony.

In one of his temporary abodes, he threatened the chambermaids that if they reported the presence of his elaborate pharmaceutical stash he'd get them fired, and genuinely seemed to believe that this threat would safeguard him and his larder. Often, in his private life, Lenny was not only naive and simplistic but downright imbecilic. I was always amazed at the transformation that took place when he stepped on stage. Those petty, small-scale life aggravations that seemed to occupy all his energy suddenly gave way to a soaring imagination – as if the 'real world' were only a pathetic suburban airport from which Lenny's shambly little monoplane, once airborne, turned into the Concorde.

Although flattered by his more admiring critics, Lenny never allowed their eulogies to muddy the clearcut perception he had of himself. He was a 'pro' – no more and no less. Someone who had zealously worked himself up from third-rate stand-up dates in the Catskills to the point where he could command large fees and the attention of sophisticated 'rooms' in San Francisco, New York, or London. 'I don't read enough books,' he once told me, 'so I guess I'm pretty shallow. I'm a lot into the physical. With me, first attraction is never intellectual.' And he

proceeded to give me chapter and verse on how, on the road, he would make a beeline for the biggest jugs and roundest bums in the chorus line and not relent until he'd 'shtupped them'. Even in the midst of a fatal car crash, he once quipped in one of his routines, with only one male and one female survivor, horniness still rears its ugly head. Like Boccaccio or Rabelais, Bruce was always reminding us of our animality and, like Sade, urging us to celebrate it. Even blue films, he often pointed out, were gloried in bile and gore. 'Nobody ever dies in blue movies,' he said – although only a few years down the line the snuff films would make us all question that one.

A few days before he left England (never to return in fact, because once his narcotic riots had become known, the Home Office barred his re-entry), I asked him what lay ahead. 'The same,' he said, 'ballbusting and brickbats.' He didn't say it sadly but with a wily, almost eager smile on his face – as if for him battle was the quotidian and he could no sooner avoid it than expect to be awarded an Emmy for Outstanding Services to Family Values. In fact, he had been consulting regularly with Stanley Kubrick and was eager to write a film they had been discussing – yet another ambition that was doomed to fizzle out in the endless array of drug busts and court cases that would torment him for the remaining four years of his life.

Lenny was the closest thing we had to a Zen comic in that era when Zen was being vigorously rediscovered and regularly proselytized – a direct descendant of those mad monks whose lunacy is depicted in the early Zen drawings. Out of an astonishing relaxation such as we find only in the finest jazz musicians, Bruce pursued his riff to the furthest borders of rationalism and then winged across. Without warning, he could thrust us into a world no longer confined by logical positivism or dulled with conventional associations – true Zen country, where new frames were added to the mind and the Third Eye not only opened but popped, rolled, swivelled, and hung out on a stalk.

It is often said that it was Lenny who opened the gates for the contemporary crop

of American comics. What a dubious distinction! To have paved the way for foul-mouthed buffoons like Shecky Green, Buddy Hackett, and Joan Rivers! No, the fact is that Lenny's tradition died with him. There were no descendants at all. What was bequeathed was only the licence for which Lenny paid such heavy dues, a licence that is not blithely exercised by no-holds-barred club comics and vulgar Las Vegas headliners.

Despite his own insistence that he was merely a child of show business, Lenny can only be appreciated when compared to the advances of literature in his time. He was the comedic counterpart of Kerouac, Burroughs, Ginsberg, Corso, and Southern, and to fully appreciate both his style and his content, reference has to be made to the best that was being written and published in the fifties and sixties.

In his amorality and civil disobedience he was something akin to Joe Orton; the moral and political repercussions were merely spin-offs from what both these artists took to be their professional vocation. In both cases, as they were made conscious of larger social implications, they tried to arrogate them into their work and make them part of their personalities, but in both cases it was after the fact. The Lenny who said, 'I'm not a comedian. And I'm not sick. The world is sick and I'm the doctor. I'm a surgeon with a scalpel for false values. I don't have an act. I just talk. I'm just Lenny Bruce,' had gradually absorbed the implications of his own press clippings. Towards the end, when his unbearable routines were filled with self-conscious

poetry about Adolf Eichmann and the injustices of the American judicial system, the old Lenny had been almost totally erased both by his champions and his tormentors, and he was unrecognizable. Personal hardship hadn't sunk him irretrievably into heroin; there would have been a few more luminous years, although it is inconceivable that he would have found any real refuge in society.

He was too hip to its deceptions ever to play the game for long and, as his soberer critics always said, 'No matter how much you like Lenny, if you listen to him long enough, there comes a time when he will turn you off.' The image of a smug, balding, buttoned-up, and respectable Lenny Bruce being given a Friars Club roast is simply unthinkable. Lenny was perhaps the first of the comic maudits – John Belushi was in the same tradition; so were Andy Kaufman and Sam Kinison and, if we're very, very lucky, there will be others.

*Lenny*, the musical, was revived in London in the summer of 1999, and recreations of Bruce tended to pop up regularly on both sides of the Atlantic. Contemporary comics always seemed to use Lenny as a measuring rod, but after the death of Kinison, there weren't too many dangerous comics around. Mainstream comedy, despite its Bruce-brokered freedom to use obscenity and profanity, became curiously tame in its subject matter. The exceptions were the new black comics who, irreverently mixing race, sex, and politics, seemed to continue where Lenny left off.