

1986

Revivals

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Recommended Citation

Hall, Donald. "Revivals." *The Iowa Review* 16.2 (1986): 88-93. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.3388>

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Revivals · Donald Hall

THREE MEN TALKED at two A.M. in the living room of a cheap suite at the Hotel Cherokee on 44th Street across from the Algonquin. Until midnight they had rehearsed a revival of Ben Higbee's *Scrapiron Ballad*, which would open in four weeks at the Theatre de Lys. The old playwright asked his producer Louis and his director Colin back to the Cherokee for brandy, excusing his invitation by saying that early rehearsals were the time for talk. Really, he asked them because he had been a widower for only five months, and had trouble sleeping.

They had almost finished the small bottle, swishing Martells in cloudy tumblers. They talked the play over for the hundredth time; they agreed on their approach to the production, and agreed also about certain worries. Colin used the phrase "period piece" too often for Ben's comfort. Then, when they had gone over an ingenue's interpretation, they began to talk about women.

Louis' third marriage was in trouble. It was his own fault, he admitted. He lost himself to infatuations with young women who acted in his plays. "I've showed I'm *sincere*," he mocked himself; "I married two of them." By this time, he said, his analyst's eyebrows discouraged him from pleading love. "Why, damn it, is somebody new always erotic? It's ridiculous." He shook his head. He had recently turned forty and gained weight; his gray suit was too small for him, and on the ring finger of his left hand a gold band sank into puffy flesh.

Ben had liked Louis immediately. He wasn't so sure about Colin, who was even younger than Louis and who had just stopped calling him Professor Higbee. Thin with nerves, Colin crossed and uncrossed his legs in their tight jeans and smiled like a sign switching on and off. He said that after an early divorce he had remained single; in the theater, he said, it was easy to marry and difficult to stay that way. He made the announcement casually while he chain-smoked Camels.

Ben remarked that *he* had stayed married a long time—but, then, he had lived mostly outside the theater. After the one success of *Scrapiron* in the late 40s, as they knew, he had taught playwrighting at a university for thirty years. When he was young and theatrical, it was true, there had been a brief first marriage. "But Lucille and I were together twenty-eight

years,” he said as if he were only providing information. After a pause he mentioned again that the revival of his play came at a fortunate time; he frankly admitted that he was lonely.

As they talked, sleepily, Louis tried defining “erotic” as he had used it. He meant something other than sexuality itself, or the wild pleasure that took place between people used to each other, even between wives and husbands, familiar enough to ignore romance, conquest, secrecy, illegitimacy, contrivance—“All that glorious bullshit,” Louis said.

Colin told a story from the year he spent with the Berliner Ensemble. He had known artists from all over East Germany. “They were all anti-regime, some way or other. When you got them alone.” He sipped his brandy. “The old ones had been underground during the war. Or so they claimed. Some were Marxists, socialist anti-Communists. Some weren’t political especially, or doctrinaire anyway, but resented the censorship. Or repression of any kind. So they printed underground magazines on old ozolid copying machines and circulated poems and stories against the regime, or stuff that the regime called formalist. They met secretly, they carried novels in briefcases, microfilm in hollowed-out canes . . . Super-spy stuff.” Colin paused, then he smirked: “They were all faithful to their wives.”

Louis nodded his head vigorously. “We grew up lying to our parents, so we go on lying the rest of our lives. Keeps you young,” he said.

“Because they betrayed the regime,” said Colin.

“But the *most* lies,” said Louis, wringing his fat hands and sighing, “are the ones we believe in the most—the same thing over and over again. I carry an erratum slip on my forehead: ‘For love read hate throughout, for hate read love.’”

They were silent for a moment. Ben remembered a story he could tell, then thought better of it. When Colin looked at his watch Ben felt loneliness roll from the room’s corners, and he interrupted Louis who was about to speak. “When we listed things—secrecy, conquest, illegitimacy—we left one thing out.”

Louis emptied the brandy bottle into his glass.

“Hatred,” said the playwright. “What you said: ‘For love read hate throughout . . .’” He borrowed from Colin the first cigarette he had touched in ten years; he set his tumbler hard on the table, splashing drops of cognac on the plastic surface. “I remember something that happened

not long after the war. I don't even remember her name."

He wanted to speak well, to keep their attention. He heard himself varying pitch and pause like a bad actor auditioning.

"She was married to a man I knew at college. She was Danish but she'd lived everywhere—beautiful, with fine distinct small features. When I first saw her I felt the breath go out of me. I've felt that way only two or three times in my life. Do you remember that Chekhov story, about the two beauties?"

Colin nodded. Ben paused to light the Camel, and after one puff coughed harshly and put it out. He wiped his eyes and went on. "Modeling took her back and forth—London, New York. When she talked that night, she kept referring to periods or places in her life which made her sound a thousand years old. She looked, oh, twenty-seven maybe. We were choosing dessert at a Jewish restaurant in Rome, and when I picked baklava, she tossed off, 'A Romanian husband I once married'—usually her English sounded native—'adored baklava.' She started to tell a story but Basil interrupted her. I had known this man slightly in college, Basil Peabody, though we moved in different sets. Basil shook his head from side to side, stared across at me, and spoke with an attempt at the epigram—which was his manner, and he wasn't very good at it. 'The gentleman in question,' he said, 'was neither Romanian nor her husband.'"

Colin drained his tumbler, put out one Camel and lighted another. Louis had finished his brandy, and from the inside pocket of his coat he pulled out a pint of Wild Turkey, loosened the cap, and set it on the table.

"Although he spoke softly, I could tell he was enraged—I suppose because of something that happened earlier, I don't know . . . His cheeks were red-blue, like the maroon tie he wore, almost purple, and I realized that he was drunk as well as furious.

"I sat in the booth next to the Danish woman. Inge! Her name just came to me. Thirty-seven years ago! . . . The booth was small and we were squeezed together. Basil sat opposite her. I thought he was a clod when I knew him at college; now I realized that his feelings for me were cooler than mine for him. I don't know why. . . . He was rich and I was successful; probably he wanted to write novels, though not enough to do anything about it. Sitting next to him, across from me in the little booth, was my wife Martha—my *then* wife, as they say—who had not spoken since we sat down except when she exclaimed over the little fried arti-

chokes we had for *hors d'oeuvres*. Delicious things.

“She was so young, Martha. Twenty-one years old.” Ben shook his head. “I was twenty-eight or nine, I suppose. We were not getting on, not at all. I was full of myself in those days, and she was no bargain. Yes, I remember; she did say one thing. After Inge mentioned the husband who adored baklava, and after Basil’s epigram, there was a pause in our conversation, naturally enough. I broke the silence by praising baklava and Martha contradicted me: Baklava was *dreadful*; the honey made the pastry soggy. That was all; nobody answered her; it was stupidly typical, of both of us. It doesn’t have to be like that . . .”

His mind suddenly filled with Martha’s face as it had looked when he packed to leave the apartment on Twelfth Street, a year after Rome—her face bloated and red-raw with tears, begging him not to go.

He returned to his story, forcing himself to speak with animation. “When she met Inge and Basil at the restaurant, Martha hated them both. Instantly. It was a way of getting at me; these were supposed to be my friends. She kept silent, icy, making her boredom as obvious as she could.” He sighed again, looking at the mottled backs of his hands, spreading out his long fingers. Colin crossed and uncrossed his legs.

“But of course she disliked Inge’s type, also—someone whose life developed entirely from beauty and fashion. You understood: a series of rich men. We knew some of the American crowd in Rome and Paris, writers and would-be writers from rich New York families. Women like Inge joined the set, wandered out again. Cannes, Gstaad . . . There were others in Rome. That was the year we spent at the Academy.

“After Basil contradicted her about the Romanian husband, she did something extraordinary. I ordered baklava and the waiter disappeared. I looked sideways at Inge and found myself pierced by a smile so tender, so intimate, that I almost melted into a baklava myself. She laughed as if Basil had made a pleasantry, and leaned so that her shoulder touched mine. To my surprise I felt myself responding under the table. I discovered her ‘eroticism,’ as we call it, not in my eyes or in my mind but in my trousers.

“Then she told her story. I can’t remember a word but it was about the pseudo-Romanian. She told it with great vivacity, waving her right hand, mimicking accents, supplying sound effects—while Martha glared past my ear, looking as bored as she could manage, and Basil gazed into his drink with his eyes half-closed. Inge gestured with her right hand because

with her left hand she was beating me off under the table.”

Louis and Colin let out whoops of surprise, boyish noises in the early morning of the hotel room. Ben heard melancholy in the sounds. He heard his own voice pretending to lightness.

“Needless to say she was subtle about it. When the waiter set down the baklava—espresso for the women, a drink for Basil—she unzipped my fly and slipped her hand through the vent in my boxer shorts. While she worked, the upper part of her arm never jiggled. She talked wildly, gesturing with her right hand while her left hand performed under the table, and I quickly reached the most erotic few seconds of my life—as my wife Martha looked past me unknowing, as this Basil-husband stared into his Galliano while two feet away Inge cuckolded him.”

When the younger men finished laughing, Louis poured himself a finger of Wild Turkey. No one spoke for a minute.

Martha’s young face returned to Ben, pinched and white in the courtroom, the old lawyer shuffling beside her with his hand on her elbow; and he remembered the astonishment with which he had suddenly felt both jealousy and intolerable loss.

“I almost choked eating the baklava,” he went on. “When I sighed it passed for a compliment to the pastry chef.” He sighed again, feeling an ocean of depression roll toward him, thinking: I have just bragged like an eighteen-year-old. “Of course it was anger, hatred, that prompted her”—he continued, unable to stop—“and that made it so delicious for me. There was nothing between us. She was beautiful, yes, but I didn’t even know her. At the time I wondered if she was interested in theatrical connections—but she was interested only in setting horns on Basil’s head. What I didn’t know, of course, was that I loathed Martha . . . and that’s why I found the moment so exquisite.”

Louis nodded vigorously at this confirmation. Colin looked at his watch again, pulled out another Camel and put it back.

“Because I was young and stupid I thought I was in love with her. For a few days anyway. I wanted to take her to a hotel on some Roman side street. But she had no interest in me. When I spoke to her outside the restaurant she pretended not to understand. I never saw her again.”

After a silence Ben yawned, struggling not to, a yawn repeated by Louis and Colin in tandem. Louis said that he had to get home and Colin stood up and stretched, nodding. Rehearsal would not begin until 5 P.M., to ac-

commodate an actress who worked in a soap, but in the meantime there were details of costumes and set. Louis had other matters to attend to, not to mention the hour with his analyst. Louis poured Ben some Wild Turkey to take to bed, then put the bottle back in his inside pocket.

As the three men stood up, Ben spoke again. "Basil's been dead twenty years. Last year Martha retired from practicing law, a profession she hadn't dreamed of, that year in Rome. I just heard that she has Parkinson's. I wonder if Inge is alive . . .

"And here am I," he said, laughing faintly, shrugging his shoulders, as he let the producer and the director out the door.

"And here am I," he said aloud when he was alone again. He looked out the window at dingy brick in the airshaft. When he turned out the light, quick scenes shifted back and forth between Martha and Lucille. Inge's face rose before him, and for a second he tasted pastry flakes, walnuts, and honey. From the next room he heard a small dog's muffled bark, and a sleepy woman's voice that repeated, "Do you want to go out, Alexander? Do you want to go out?"