

YORICK'S SKULL (Part 2)

By
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(A Four-Day New York Odyssey:
With Sondheim, Goldoni, Jacques Brel, Odets and Yorick's Skull)

BREL

"AH, I can see me now,
So cold and so alone;
As the flowers slowly die,
In my field of little bones.

AH, I can see me now;
I can see me at the end
Of this voyage that I' m on
Without a love, without a friend. . ."

THE BREL INFLUENCE

I wrote an original musical, FROM THE BODONI COUNTY SONGBOOK ANTHOLOGY, with the late composer Claibe Richardson, which I subtitled, "a 21st Century combination Our Town/Spoon River/Jacques Brel —on acid.!" The Brel part of my musical revue had to do with my characters stepping out to sing their angst away—as the characters do in JACQUES BREL IS ALIVE AND WELL AND LIVING IN PARIS; as even a dead man humorously sings from his coffin, quoted above (from the song "Funeral Tango"). What also holds my BODONI COUNTY together is the county itself that the characters all live in, and in their common objective: *To get out.*

What holds together JACQUES BREL IS ALIVE AND WELL AND LIVING IN PARIS is — Jacques Brel.

Jacques Brel was a Belgian-born troubadour who set his own French lyrics to his own music. Then he performed them—as nobody else in the world could. He was dramatic, handsome, charismatic, astonishing, playful, romantic, cynical, brutal, passionate, compassionate. His songs were about love sought, love gained, love lost, love denied, love confused, the despair of love, the giddiness and silliness of love; death; the waste and stupidity of war; the loneliness and despair of old age—among other things. You may not have known the French, but the stuff still burrowed into your gut. Instantly. Each song, like so many French cabaret chanson had the density of a one-act play. But, unlike most French cabaret singers, who, to me, have a built-in *savoir-faire* elegance in their sound (which I love), Brel had a distinct grittiness and brutal bite in his; resulting, perhaps, from the mix of French with his Flemish-language roots. Piaf has that sound; perhaps because of her gutter roots. Listen to Bertolt Brecht sing his songs—he, too, has that grit and bite; often rolls his R's and spits out his consonants. Brel, on recordings (I never saw him in person), I often felt was (as were Piaf and Brecht) over the top —and I loved it. Love it.

In the 1960s, JACQUES BREL/ALIVE Etc., was an off-Broadway hit that seemed to run forever. I did not see the original company perform the show, but I saw subsequent companies in subsequent venues—professional and non-professional—and the JACQUES BREL/ALIVE shows always worked. The lyrics were translated from the French and adapted into English by Eric Blau and Mort Shuman. Apparently, Brel adored what Blau and Shuman did with his songs. I am delighted that the show is back because, in the past few years, I've been feeling that it was time again for JACQUES BREL/ALIVE to have a revival. (I feel that about the Moross/Latouche musical, THE GOLDEN APPLE, and —Lo!—that musical is being given a concert reading at this year's Bernard Shaw Festival in Canada, directed by Paul Sportelli. I'll be attending. Can a GOLDEN APPLE production be far behind?).

So off to the Zipper Theatre I zip, to see if the JACQUES BREL/ALIVE magic will work for me again.

It does.

I'm in a giddy mood as I throng my way downtown straight south to 37th Street, because I'm rested and still triumphant from the happy ending of the lost-wallet incident, and I conjure up a silly image of the Zipper Theatre which will feature, I hope, a large neon display of a gorgeous black-haired woman—loose-bloused, with exposed naval-with-emerald in her navel, zipping and unzipping the two-story fly on her tight jeans, and I begin to conjure up a companion theatre, located directly across from The Zipper— “The Velcro Theatre” — and. . .

From the moment I set foot in the lobby of the Zipper Theatre, I feel right at home (Remember: I'm a child of Off-Off Broadway spaces). And it looks and smells like the right venue for Brel. The theatre was, in fact, an old zipper factory. There's a bar in the lobby and there's a lot of Brel mood; and, as you enter the theatre proper, you are led to your —car seat? That's right: The mini stadium seating is made up of leathered double car seats. It's like sitting on the kind of old-Ford upholstered seats on which you used to make out. Each audience member is close to the stage; which seems to have enough height, depth and width for a solid cabaret-like show. The house is full.

“Join us now, we're on a marathon;
Dancing, dancing through the nights and days. . .

We must dance because the Fifties zing
The Fifties zing because the Sixties swing
And the Seventies flash and the Eighties bang
And the Nineties whimper and the century hangs. . .”

The Brel lyric I just quoted is from his song, MARATHON, in which the 20th century is presented as a dizzying dance montage of key world events. MARATHON was the opening number of the 1960s JACQUES BREL/ALIVE, Etc., and prepared the audience for a marathon through the emotions of an astonishing variety of characters in extremely pressured

moments in their lives. As I write this and think myself back to the Zipper Theatre's JACQUES BREL/ALIVE experience, I think that "Marathon" again opened the show. But, in fact, as I review the program to write this piece, I see that Marathon is not in this production— at all; this production opens with a Brel song sung in French—"Le Diable (Ca Va)" — a song I don't know, and the words of which I don't understand; but it is a very "up" number, which I immediately like, sung by the excellent Gay Marshall (I like her, too), and which seems to be free of Brel irony (I'm probably wrong about that—it's hard to imagine a Brel number free of irony—I must get a translation); and so I figure that this production wants to get the show off the ground with a more typical opening rouser. That's all right with me. But the next song brings us back into a Brel signature song, "If We Only Have Love," sung, interestingly enough, by the music director, Eric Svejcar— as if the production wants a more detached performer to comment on a theme of the evening (this song will close the show with the entire ensemble singing).

. . . If we only have love,
 We can reach those in pain;
 We can heal all our wounds,
 We can use our own names.
 If we only have love,
 We can melt all the guns.
 And then give the new world
 To our daughters and sons. . .

The production then moves from that simple, somewhat sentimental view of a generic love for all mankind, into the entire company singing, "Alone (Seul)" and we start entering the darker side of Brel, and the personal, darker side of love:

"WE find love, you and I;
 It's a new game to play.
 Then we tell our first lie,
 And see love go away.
 And we find we're alone. . ."

And a strange thing happens to me. At first. I begin to observe the show in a multi-leveled way: I'm watching this excellent cast perform, while hearing in my head the original cast from the 60s production, and hearing, also, Brel himself (I have most of his recordings). I'm feeling sorry for these performers: Frank, I say to myself, let them do their own Brel without interference from the past, or the dead. But here's the even stranger thing. *These* terrific performers do make their own statements and the Brel phantoms just seem to enrich what I'm seeing and what they're doing.

Soon, though, for me, the phantoms leave altogether by the fifth number: "Jackie. "

"If I could be for only an hour,
If I could be for an hour every day,
If I could be for just one little hour—
Cute, cute, cute in a stupid-ass way."

Robert Cucchioli is a leading man with a rich, clear baritone, who, in the song, "Jackie," takes the character's inner-swagger fantasy life and sing-dances it all over the stage, while, at the same time, rendering a romantic need in the character that makes that need endearing, somehow.

Another song Cucchioli sings in the show with an intense, inner life, is one of my favorite Brel songs: "Fanette." In it, the character, in great pain, observes his old love Fanette being deliriously happy with a new love.

"I saw, I saw them arm-in-arm enfolded by the sea
They looked so much in love they never looked at me.
They saw, they saw me and they laughed,
they stood and watched me cry
And sang their little song, I cursed the summer sky. . ."

The song is very visual and it occurs to me that the lyric could be a scenario for a music video: Lots of cinematic dissolves from and through the broken-hearted character singing—then, from his Point Of View, dissolve to the beach, and into the

waves—and then the camera stays with the two lovers running and, in the foam of the breaking waves, they look back, laughing and splashing; — then we pan back to the lover in pain, and end with a close up of him singing . . .

“We were never two friends,
Fanette and I.
The empty streets are cold and crying in July.
But when the waves are still
I still can hear it yet. . .
I hear a little song. . .
I hear
Fanette.”

Brel’s songs, it seems to me, are generally built on repetition and crescendo. Cucchioli closes the first act with Brel’s, “Amsterdam.” I have a recording of a live performance of Brel singing “Amsterdam,” where, by the end, the crowd is screaming and drowning out the climax.

“. . .In the port of Amsterdam
You can see sailors dance;
Paunches bursting their pants,
Grinding women to paunch;
They’ve forgotten the tune
That their whiskey voice croaks,
Splitting the night with the
Roar of their jokes. . .”

The music is a strong melody that is slowly stated. Then repeated. Then speeded up with the orchestration becoming more complex. Then repeated with more speed. Then more complex orchestration, with the singer becoming more passionate and almost croaking the final rush:

“In the port of Amsterdam
There’s a sailor who drinks,
And he drinks and he drinks,
And he drinks once again.
He drinks to the health

Of the whores of Amsterdam,
 Who have promised their love
 To a thousand other men

In the port of Amsterdam
 IN THE PORT OF AMSTERDAM. . .”

And the orchestra is so loud now that the singer is overwhelmed by it and has to shout-sing over it. We don't know who this sailor is; but, even though he is, on one level, simply a narrator, on the deeper level he is a character of the Amsterdam port with a passionate – almost desperate stake in that world that may also be overwhelming him— and Cucchioli has the chops to override the orchestra and bring the first act to its smashing close.

The other performers also have the Brel chops. But first, my special Brel intermission.

Special, because in the car seats next to me are an older gentleman and his son. The man is in his mid sixties and his son is in his forties. I know all this because the older man talks to anyone within earshot and makes lame jokes, but is very friendly and gives you his bio immediately. He is Manny; his son is Saul. Both are lawyers; Manny is newly retired. I was going to read all the biographical information in my program, sitting out the intermission in my car seat, but Manny needs to talk. He's a friendly New Yorker and likes the performers, but is not quite sure what he feels about the show, and this leads Manny to admitting that he's always wanted to write a play, because he has seen so much and has lots of ideas. I tell him, well, if you ever give it a try, just remember that characters in a play want things and those wants come up against obstacles that the characters need to overcome. And those wants and obstacles must inform every moment. At the least, I say (always the teacher), dramatic characters should be under tremendous pressure, as the characters in this Brel revue are. He's impressed, because he's never thought of this. Manny asks me for my bio. I tell him I'm a playwright and wait for the obvious question: “No kidding? Would I have heard of any of

your plays?” “I doubt it,” I say. “Productions of my plays were produced Off-Broadway in the 60s.” He insists I mention some of them. I do. Manny shrugs. “Never heard of them.” Natch. The second act begins. I hope Manny looks for the pressures. All the performers certainly do. And render them, too.

Rodney Hicks (he’s since left the show) excites me for two reasons: He is a young dynamic actor/singer/dancer who can emotionally inhabit all his Brel numbers and because I am always looking for the young black performer to play the lead, Willy Beau Squire, in my musical CONGO SQUARE. The actor/singer/dancer must carry the score (which also was written by the late composer Claibe Richardson) A CONGO SQUARE venue is, at the moment — and alas— in my fantasy mind’s eye. Hicks digs into the bitter anti-war song, NEXT, in which a newly scripted soldier, naked, is hustled through a line of inspection and treated like a piece of meat

“Naked as sin, an army towel
Covering my belly
Some of us blush, somehow
Knees turning to jelly
Next, next

I was still just a kid
There were a hundred like me
I followed a naked body
A naked body followed me
next, next”

The soldier than catalogues all the “nexts” in his military world.

“Next, next
I swear on the wet head
Of my first case of gonorrhoea
It is his ugly voice
That I forever hear
Next, next

That voice that stinks of whiskey
 Of corpses and of mud
 It is the voice of nations
 It is the thick voice of blood”

Again — repetition of driving melody and (this time) ugly images that crescendo to a bitter and angry cry of bravado —

“One day I'll cut my legs off
 Or burn myself alive
 Anything, I'll do anything
 To get out of line to survive.
 Not ever to be next.
 NOT EVER TO BE NEXT.”

And the song, at its peak, just CUTS OUT.

I may be wrong, but I sense that the audience, in the performance I'm attending, is grabbed and stirred most by the war songs. But I may sense this because I am.

Gay Marshall sings Brel's most beautiful song about the pity and horror of the loss of sons (“Sons Of”). Perhaps this song originally was not written as a specific loss resulting from war, but it was first introduced in the original JACQUES BREL/ALIVE during the Vietnam war, and it is included in this production, during this period of a war, in which our sons continue to return in body bags and body parts to their grieving American mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, grandparents and communities; and the young sons around the world are having their souls also flung into the abyss.

“Sons of the thief, sons of the saint
 Who is the child with no complaint.
 Sons of the great or sons unknown,
 All were children like your own.

The same sweet smiles, the same sad tears,
 The cries at night, the nightmare fears;
 Sons of the great or sons unknown
 All were children like your own...
 So long ago: long, long, ago..."

And once again – the lovely waltz starts slowly and repeats
 and repeats — then crescendos. . .

"Some built the roads, some wrote the poems,
 Some went to war, some never came home.
 Sons of your sons or sons passing by,
 Children we lost in lullabies..."

The same sweet smiles, the same sad tears,
 The cries at night, the nightmare fears;
 Sons of the great or sons unknown,
 All were children like your own. . .
 Like your own, LIKE YOUR OWN!

And Gay Marshall is left to sing the two songs delivered in the show in French ("Le Diable-Ca Va" and "Ne Me Quitte Pas"), as if to remind us of the Brel sound in the original language. It is also left to her to sing the one song that so nails the total Brel persona to the stage: "Marieke" — another song of loss, in which the singer is in great pain about the loss of someone named Marieke; but what is so interesting here is that the refrain of the repetitive lyric is sung in Flemish. I find very moving the tension set up between the juxtaposition of two languages:

"Ay, Marieke, Marieke,
 The Flanders sun, burns the sky
 Since you are gone.
 Ay, Marieke, Marieke
 In Flanders field the poppies die,
 Since you are gone.

Zonder liefde, warme liefde

Waait de wind de stomme wind
 Zonder leifde, warme liefde
 Weent de zee de grijze zee
 Zonder liefde, warme leifde
 Lijdt het licht het donk're licht
 En schuurt het zand o ver mijn land
 Mijn platte land, mijn Vlanderland

I am able find a translation of the Dutch section of Marieke by Des de Moor (1999)

"Cold and loveless, cold and loveless,
 Blows the wind the wordless wind.
 Cold and loveless, cold and loveless,
 Weeps the sea, the old grey sea;
 Cold and loveless, cold and loveless,
 Throbs the light, the darkened light;
 With scouring sand across my land
 My flat land my Flanders land "

The following notes are from de Moor's album notes for an album of Brel's songs.

"Brel's Flemish connections have a personal fascination. I'm half Dutch and grew to love Flanders when my [then] partner lived there for a while. Brel had a love/hate relationship with the place: he loathed the Brussels bourgeoisie who spawned him, and on a particularly bitter track on his last album he more-or-less labeled the whole nation Catholic Nazis. But he also wrote several beautiful, wistful songs about the ordinary people of the 'flat land'. To me this song will always evoke my own memories of train journeys across Flanders on my way to visit the man I loved. Looking out of the window between Brugge and Gent I'd see those skies so familiar from the paintings of Breugel and Rubens: grey and heavy with rain, forever crying for someone's lost Marieke."

It is clear that Gay Marshall is deep into the center of pain in this song. She does it simply, without frills and lets contrasts between the English and the repetitions of the Flemish clash and lets them lead her to an emotional and musical crescendo, and to a painful, almost unbearable finish.

This particular song can't seem to miss. I have Brel singing "Marieke" in French and in the Dutch language and it is, of course, definitive, But I also have Karen Akers singing it with just piano accompaniment, and Akers (whose diction is exemplary), and in her own cool way, creates an emotional life that is also extremely moving; even the piano accompaniment catches the emotion and crescendos to a thundering despair. Gay Marshall makes it her own and lifts the show another notch.

Nataschia Diaz fills out the cast and finds the innocent woman who tries to recall a once-lover who forces her to confront reality, in the song, "I Loved":

"I loved all games and fairy tales,
As Strangely odd as that may seem;
I loved firelight and witches' tales,
You see, you were there in my dreams.

You laced the night with raging storms,
You threw lightning 'cross the skies;
You kissed my mouth with promises,
You burned me with your lies. . ."

Diaz brings the song home, slyly showing the joy of reaping some revenge:

"I loved the towns where we made love,
And the hotels where we played games.
You thought I'd never live it down
Yet you see . . .
I've forgotten your name. . ."

So there.

Diaz has a comic flair. In “Timid Frieda,” she plays, what seems to be a put-upon Innocent who is finally getting out (shades of Bodoni County). Brel, as stated above by Des de Moor, detested the middle class (his song, “Les Bourgeoisie” is a brutal satire on the Middle Class — perhaps too easy a target, in my view; still the energy behind Brel’s detestation drives home his distaste with a delicious theatricality, in this show). And timid Frieda seems to be escaping from a middle class existence. Cucchioli and Rodney Hicks sing the narration as Diaz does Frieda. Coy and seemingly shy, she confronts life.

“Timid Frieda,
 Will life seize her
 On the street where
 The new dreams gather;
 Like fearless robins
 Joined together
 In high-flying bands?
 She feels taller,
 Troubles smaller,
 On the street where
 She's lost in wonder;
 There she goes
 With her valises,
 Held so tightly in her hands.”

Frieda is frightened—yes; but in the next verse we see her quality for pluck— which she rhymes with. . .

“Timid Frieda
 Who will lead her
 On the street where
 The cops all perish?
 For they can't break her,
 And she can take her
 Brave new fuck you stand.
 Yet she's frightened,
 Her senses heightened,
 On the street where

The darkness brightens.
 There she goes
 With her valises,
 Held so tightly in her hands”

You want to know depressing? My students never heard of the word “valise.”

Later, Diaz and Hicks sing, “You’re Not Alone.” Interesting choice; making what was originally a song for solo lover, into a love duet where one lover comforts an inconsolable partner. In the original JACQUES BREL/ALIVE, it was sung by Elly Stone. It is one of Brel’s most intensely lyrical outburst (the original in French is called JEF) and Brel’s rendition is one of his most passionate. And Diaz and Hicks catch the desperation in the song as they cling to each other.

The song begins with a parlando section. . .

“No, love, you're not alone
 Don't let it get you down
 It's just another day
 And everything's turned brown
 You've walked your bloody mile
 I'll hold you for a while

No, love, you're not alone
 I swear the sun will rise
 I promise you you'll laugh
 Here, love, dry your eyes. . .Come on.”

Then the melody takes off and soars. . .

“Cooome, we've got each other now,
 That's got to be enough,
 Pretend you're really tough, love.
 Come on, love, come on
 We've got each other now
 And if that's not enough

Remember being young. .

Your pain will fall away
 We'll relive yesterday
 And start where we began, love,
 We'll do it if we can, love
 We'll do it if we can...

Come on, love. Come on. Come on. COME ON.”

As one can see from the few samples listed above, BREL has a different musical theatre aesthetic from the usual musical. What is that aesthetic? I think it has to do with an existential view of life? What I take away from the Brel experience is an absurd world of people existing alone in that world —no matter what human connections are made.

“They hold each other's hand,
 They walk without a sound.
 Down forgotten streets
 Their shadows kiss the ground.
 Their footsteps sing a song
 That's ended before it's begun
 They walk without a sound. . .
 The desperate ones. . .”

The entire cast of BREL/ALIVE movingly sing Brel's, “The Desperate Ones.” And I think of The Beatles, “Eleanor Rigby.” And I think of the one musical arrangement I miss from the original 60's version: the Eric Satie-like arrangement of “The Desperate Ones,” with just an acoustic piano playing a measured accompaniment—an arrangement that stays indelible in my musical memory.

“My Death” is similarly bleak.

“My death waits like an old roué;
 So confident I'll go his way,
 Whistle for him — and the passing time. . .

But whatever is behind the door,
 There is nothing much to do.
 Angel or devil, I don't care;
 For in front of that door there is you”

Natascia Diaz descends into the abyss of this one. And as I listen, I am struck by similar existential subject matter used in other popular songs. Johnny Mercer's, “Days Of Wine and Roses,” for example; an amazing lyric (consisting, by the way, of just two sentences):

“The days of wine and roses,
 laugh and run away,
 like a child at play,
 through a meadowland,
 toward a closing door,
 a door marked ‘never more,’
 that wasn't there before.”

Ditto, for even as romantic a classic as the Dietz and Schwartz, “Dancing In The Dark” :

“Dancing in the dark;
 ‘till the tune ends,
 we're dancing in the dark;
 and it soon ends;
 We're waltzing in the wonder
 Of why we're here.
 Time hurries by, we're here—
 then gone.”

And then there is the Lieber and Stoller's, “Is That All There Is?"; made a popular classic by Peggy Lee.

“. . .If that's all there is;
 if that's all there is, my friend,
 then let's keep dancing.”

But here's the paradox. The sadness and desperation, and rage at it all in a Jacques Brel song is that it is often filled with —

what?— joy; the joy I feel from other Absurdists: Ionesco, Beckett, etc. There's a joyous energy to that pain and, in Brel's case, that energy derives, in part, from the music.

The next to last number in the show, "Carousel," illustrates that:

"Carnivals and cotton candy
Carousels and calliopes. . ."

The Carousel starts out slow and deliberate in this amusement park of life. . .

"Fortune-tellers in glass cases;
We will always remember these;
Merry-go-rounds quickly turning
Quickly turning for you and me.
And the whole world madly turning
Turning, turning 'till you can't see"

Then the life on the Carousel starts to speed up. . .

"We're on a carousel,
A crazy carousel;
And now we go around
Again we go around
And now we spin around
We're high above the ground
And down again around
And up again around
So high above the ground
We feel we've got to yell. . ."

And, as usual, the song keeps gaining speed and the entire cast, with their myriad characters now embedded in the marrows of their souls, spin around the stage, until the joy of the musical motif turns into whirling dance of desperation and collapse. . .

—And into the finale of compassion, and an attempt at

connection and love—to attain the unattainable.

“ . . . If we only have love
 We can melt all the guns
 And then give the new world
 To our daughters and sons

If we only have love
 Then we'll only be men
 And we'll drink from the Grail
 To be born once again
 Then with nothing at all
 But the little we are
 We'll have conquered all time
 All space, the sun, and the stars. . .”

And after the standing ovation (again I feel it is earned and I stand, too) I leave for the lobby —exhilarated, moved and the sense of despair at the center, tempered by joy and compassion.

I wait for actors in the lobby. Like to congratulate performers when they have so entertained and excited me. I also wanted to talk to Rodney Hicks about his future plans, and to sense, one on one, if he could truly be a Willy Beau for my musical, CONGO SQUARE. I only get to meet Bob Cucchioli. Charming. Delighted I liked him and the show. I ask him if BREL/ALIVE is in a limited run. He says no, it's an open run. Good. Then the big question: Will there be a cast album? Yes, he says; to be released, he thought, in the fall.

I've just placed my order for the recording. And I plan, now, to collect as much Brel-iana as I can lay my hands on. At this point in my life, this passionate, existential troubadour speaks to me as no other entertainer ever has (Well: Maybe, for other reasons, Sinatra; but that's for another essay).

I head back to the Edison.

DAY THREE: MUSEUMS, A STUDENT ENCOUNTER, OLD WARRIORS AND VALIDATION.

I meet Max at The Brooklyn Diner on west 57th Street. Max is a recent former student of mine. Graduate student. Married a Croatian girl. They live in Brooklyn and Max is temping as he makes the rounds, takes classes. Tall, smart, gifted actor with a Jimmy Stewart presence and smile. I admire Max. And I'm grateful to Max. He validated me as a teacher. Max is one of those students who buys into what you're teaching, assimilates it all and makes it his own. In the three years in the graduate program he grew a great deal.

I like the Brooklyn Diner. It looks like an old fashioned art-nouveau diner, seemingly holding up large office building; except it's up-scale and at night the guy at the door wears a tuxedo. Good food. Big breakfasts. I make the mistake of ordering French Toast. Obscenely rich with whipped cream. Max is smart; settles for eggs.

