

# DISPATCH FROM THE PLUSH LINED TRENCHES OF THE CLASS WAR

**I**t's a shame, really, that Marx and Lenin gave Marxism/Leninism a bad name. There's a lot to be said for smashing the state, shooting the aristos, and sending the golfers and the shoppers up to Moose Factory or Fort Snowshoe to make shitty heavy machinery."

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At the Showcase Cinema during the Festivals of Festivals we had A Policy, which declared that between shows the entire theatre, including the lobby, must be cleared. Meaning that anyone who had watched a film and then wanted to see the next one on our schedule as well, had to leave the building, join the line-up, and reenter. It was possible that if the next film was very popular and the line had formed early, people leaving the previous screening could already be too late to get in to the next film – though this never actually happened.

There were good reasons for our policy of house-clearing, but its enforcement sometimes became a little strained. Fifty people in the lobby constituted a real problem, but when forty of them unhappily but politely left when they were asked, the remaining ten were really no longer any sort of a problem at all, as anyone could see. One felt bound to shoo them out, however, "because of the principle of the thing". It's the "...if I make an exception for you, buddy, everybody will want to stand on my lawn to watch the parade" line of reasoning, and it's an act of loyalty, of a sort, toward the polite forty who left without starting a debate. If it were possible to get a democratic result by crying out "Forty of you will have to go outside and join the back of the line – choose amongst yourselves which ten will stay", that would almost be a possibility. But since that wouldn't work, you have to ask everyone to leave, and then make the last lingering ten leave as well, because otherwise you've penalized the sensible forty and greased the squeaky wheel once again.

If there should be an over-capacity crowd from the "passholders line" alone ("ticket buyers" being a lesser breed without the law, and set apart from our ethical calculations entirely) then you've cut off ten people from the back of the line, who have as good a claim to see the film they've arrived and queued for as the lobby-squatters with clear schedules who would happily monopolize their seats all day. But here is a demonstration of practical politics: the ten people at the back of the line don't know what's going on, or why they can't get in, and they can't get at you, and nobody can even say very exactly which ten people they are – so their rather abstract claim is automatically ignored.

There are other practical, political, and moral reasons for entirely clearing the theatre and filling it "from scratch" for each film. The trouble is, it's not possible to explain even this abridged version ten or twenty times in five or ten minutes. It's not one of those quick and final, "because those are the fire regulations" type of things. It eats up time and requires attention and admits along the way points that can be debated. So you have to rely on public courtesy to assume that you have a valid reason for asking everyone to leave.

But there were a few people who were used to initiating "scenes" in their lives, people who would feel no shame at all in berating a waiter or ticking off a maid or refusing to pay a caterer's bill, and who certainly weren't about to surrender any advantage that could be kept by a mere exercise of ill-humour.

There was, for example, a woman who asked to be let into the theatre toward the end of a movie "just to buy some popcorn". But after getting her popcorn she settled down in the lobby to eat it, mooching around in an inconspicuous way, trying, as it were, to make herself invisible by habituation. There was no particular Policy that said you couldn't eat popcorn in the lobby during a movie; however, the lobby was cleared completely between shows, so it was useless as a line-jumping tactic. Unless you were willing to grab onto the door-frame and have a tantrum, that is. This woman was ready, willing and able. But first she tried philosophy. She told me about the Spirit of the Festival, how petty rules are not Festive, how the elite film buffs should be able to watch film after film and have passionate discussions about them in the lobby without being bothered by the comings and going of the dabblers and day-trippers.

"Yes, I quite see what you mean," I said, "but the thing is, who chooses the exceptions to the rule? Let's say a hundred and fifty people want to stay, and the lobby holds fifty; which fifty stay, and how do you get the other hundred to leave? You can't just declare yourself an exception, you see, so you'll have to leave now, please."

"I'm not leaving."

"Just like that, eh? You're staying?"

"I've been waiting here for forty-five minutes. If I went outside now I'd have to join the line at the back. I'm not leaving, and you can't make me. What's your name, I'm going to call the Festival Office tomorrow and report you."

(I point at my Festival photo-ID on which my name is printed) "Please do. But if you come back tomorrow, you will still have to leave the theatre after the film."

"I'm not going outside."

(Pause)

"Oh?... You're a pain in the ass", I concluded, and walked away.

A Festival volunteer had come over in the middle stages of our dialogue and had gotten her oar in the water, which only served to muddy it up. She fancied herself as a rational debater, which gave the popcorn-eater opportunities for digression and moral embellishment. Running out of polemical resources within the first minute or so, the volunteer cited "the fire laws".

Now, I've learned that lying is a bad idea in this sort of case. If your only rationale is that it suits your convenience to inconvenience others, and that you have the power to enforce any logic you see fit, then that's what you have to go with. The queue-jumper could have seized onto the lie, and demanded that one of us accompany her while she telephoned the Fire Marshal and insisted on it over and over whenever we tried to change the course of the debate. Fortunately, she just stuck like family to her main fiction, which was that she was of the elite who wanted to discuss art and life in the lobby between films,

in the face of the fact that she had nobody to discuss anything with, hadn't seen the foregoing film, and had actually just moved the head of the queue, in the person of herself alone, into the lobby of the theatre which was better fitted to her sensibilities than the crude and crowded nature of Yonge St.

In the end, I could promise her that she would get back in for the next show, that the line was not long enough to pose any danger of filling the house, that she would be outside for no more than ten minutes. But she didn't care. She didn't think that she was the sort of person who had to wait in lines - she didn't care if others had to, only that she should be excepted. She didn't feel that she belonged to the lining-up class, and was crude and spoiled enough to have a tantrum about it.

But on the other hand, I was at the meeting point of principle and practicality. In principle, this woman should go outside. But in practice, she wouldn't, and in practice, it didn't matter much - the occasional self-declared exception to the rules isn't worth going to war over (though the idea of beating her to death with a weighted queue-rope standard and trampling on her corpse had its charms). She was free to stay, and I was free to think ill of her.

Aristocrats are so cute and stupid. "Art" (in this little corner of history at least) is understood to be politically left. And I'd guess that this loathsome parasite who had settled into our theatre like a tapeworm understood herself to be left as well. Her soul, she would say in hushed and reverent tones to the director if she managed to ooze up next to him between foreign films, stood on its tippy-toes and reached up high in exalted communion with the whole bittersweet ballocks of human circumstance as revealed in self-conscious celluloid glimpses of faraway places of which we know nothing. Oooh, just thinking about it made her want to give money to charity and the NDP. And yet, the political system most exactly tempered to suit her would be that of South Africa. What she really wanted to say to us was that she should be allowed to stay, off the uncouth, dirty, noisy street, because she was white folk.

The next day, I felt fair and virtuous in approaching a rather attractive and inoffensive-looking young woman who was lounging demurely in the lobby, and asking her to leave now along with all the others who were quietly filing out in response to their final call. No favorites here, no exceptions made for class or physical charm. I would have liked to have done her some easy favour - pretty girls with a certain attitude roll easily through the early years of their lives on this common impulse. Shop guys give them a break on prices. Cop guys let them off with a warning. Smart guys write their school essays for them. Successful guys give them things, and eventually acquire them and keep them in the style to which they wish to become accustomed. It's a rather confused kind

of chivalry, I suppose. Self-interest doesn't play a real part, except in the very crude-minded. She's not going to think you're a Nice Guy because you snuck her to the top of the pile and printed her photos in half an hour because she was distressed by the idea of having to make another trip later in the afternoon. She's not going to turn out to be the key to the puzzle of how to be happy. She will be a little bit charming, a little bit grateful, and you will feel like a conditioned chimp that's been given a food pellet.

Nearly everyone who hoped to stay in the lobby until the next film followed a similar strategy. First, they pretended to be distracted when the lobby was addressed en masse, and then they tried to close themselves off from outside contact within a knot of vivacious

understood, I am not 'allowing' you to stay, and I disapprove of you personally. "I didn't make it that dense a formula, but those are the elements of it, and it just drove her wild. I wasn't debating - she had immediately declared her absolute refusal to leave, so for my opening move, I tipped over my king, so to speak. There was nothing more to say, but she couldn't cope with that - she was ready to fight and hated being shrugged off. I repeated that she was free to stay if she refused to leave, and she demanded my name. She said the other theatres were letting people stay. She said her parents were Gold Patrons. Whaaaaat?

What?! Gold Patrons are people who give a whack of money to the Festival, a couple of

screwed up a passing-marks life and snatched defeat from the very gates of victory... and so on. Just a mess. But if you're in the Apocalypse Club (you actually get a medallion to wear if you cough up \$100 dollars or more) you just hustle right on in, like the folks in the First Class and VIP lounge at the airport.

One imagines an unfortunate act of God that makes twisted carcasses out of everyone in the theatre; servants (that is, employees of "the service industry") loyal even after death standing and directing the ambulance crews to carry out the bodies of the Gold Patrons first. It doesn't matter to Gold Patrons if they secure any practical or meaningful advantage, only that

their status is recognized. Gold Patrons identify themselves to savages the same way Victorian explorers shouted out "I am a British subject!" as they were taken off to be made into the daily special. Their credit cards are Gold, the doormen at their Golden apartments know they're Gold, their children go to Gold schools. To the greatest possible degree they deal only with people who recognize and acknowledge their Goldness, and they buy Gold Patronage so that even among the clamoring masses their Goldness will be marked. "We've paid more than The Others,

so we can do whatever the fuck we like" - it's as simple as that, in the Golden Mind.

But here's this 30-year-old brat saying "My parents are Gold Patrons, and my grandparents are Gold Patrons." Isn't it rich?

I wish I'd been quicker in my wits. I would have felt like a tremendously clever fellow afterward if I'd said "...What? What?!? Your parents and grandparents are Gold Patrons? I'm sorry... I didn't... why, you should have said something earlier!" (To the ushers) "Hey, one of you men get this lady a complimentary cup of coffee. Move it!! I WILL TAKE FULL RESPONSIBILITY! This woman is the get of two generations of Gold Patronage!"

I've always wanted to say that I would take full responsibility for something. There is something peculiarly satisfying, something secretly and stupidly amusing about repeating fatuous cliches. In the early days of the Festival I'd read *The Curse of Lono* by Hunter Thompson, and I'd wasted no time in trying out the phrase "We're very rich men. Money means nothing to us." That was at the all-night photofinishing place, where we were told it would cost an extra \$4 to goose up the print exposure one stop. We got a chuckle out of that at the time, but maybe I should have said "Do what I tell you! My parents and my grandparents were GOLD PATRONS."

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STAFF

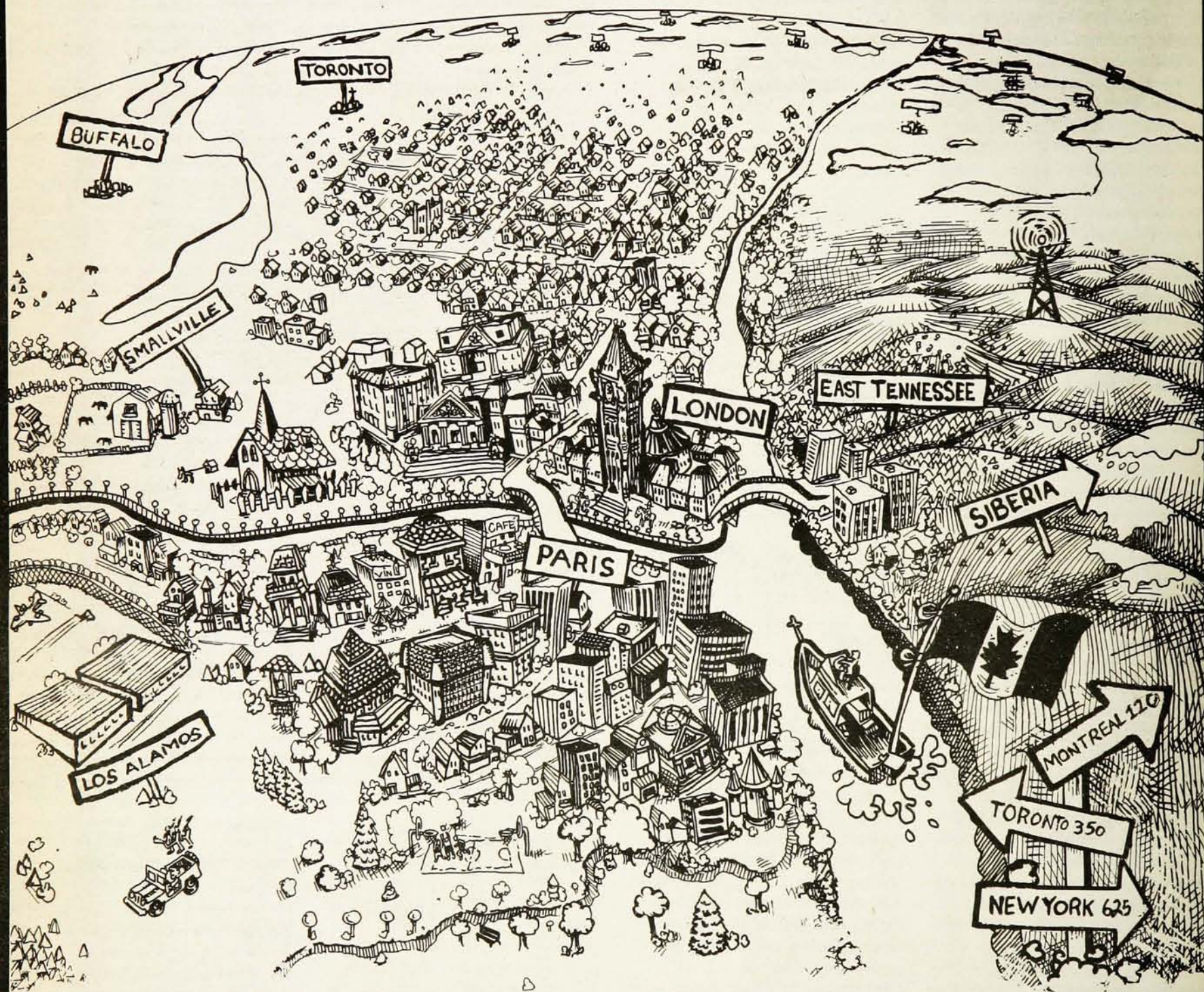
camaraderie. If they were alone, they enclosed themselves in an autistic bubble, staring at the posters on the wall with the dramatic concentration of art worshippers in a gallery. Unequivocally interrupted, they would focus whatever open-faced disingenuous charm they could muster onto you, hoping to suck up. Finally, when a direct personal appeal was served, they would slink out looking more embarrassed than annoyed.

This person who had been inspiring me with vague presentiments of virtuous professionalism followed the initial movements of the avoidance strategy. She assumed the attitude of one alone in a solipsistic trance while I chased off the cheaters, quite unaware of her increasing solitude. But it didn't come as any surprise to her when I finally intruded on her meditations, and then - bang! she was off her mark like Ben Johnson. She'd obviously had a lot of practice at being a snotty little viper - I bet she'd been hell on her brothers and sisters when she was little. I had my line better worked out now: "I can't make you leave if you declare yourself an exception to the rules that 'everyone' must follow if this thing is to work, and just so it's

thousand dollars, and get Gold Patron Passes and a promise that their superior status will be recognized and admired wherever they go. It is a spiritual category - a Gold Patron is not a type of pass, but a type of person. Their passes merely confirm their identity. They are out there on the street and in theatres filled with the masses, and they need a clear mark of privilege to ensure that they will not be confused with Just Anyone.

One is reminded of the Reverend Earnest Angley's Apocalypse Club, membership in which, or donating to which - same thing - will ensure that when the bubble bursts, you'll get into Heaven ahead of everyone else. Well, you can see the problem: when the last trumpet sounds, you'll have four or five billion souls all suddenly crowding the Pearly Gates. And each one would have to be ID'd and his or her background checked and rated. And then all the ones who got sent to Hell would be crowding around arguing with the Archangel guy at the gates about how there must be a mistake and insisting on talking personally to God and producing testimonials from weeping children, and nobody in the line would want to press or tell the sinners to sod off and let the righteous pass, in case a last-minute flash of aggression

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