

How Did I Get to Princess Margaret? (And How Did I Get Her to the World Wide Web?)

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The paper explores the growing use of tools from the arts and humanities for investigation and dissemination of social science research. Emerging spaces for knowledge transfer, such as the World Wide Web, are explored as outlets for “performative social science”. Questions of ethnics and questions of evaluation which emerge from performative social science and the use of new technologies are discussed. Contemporary thinking in aesthetics is explored to answer questions of evaluation. The use of the Internet for productions is proposed as supporting the collective elaboration of meaning supported by Relational Aesthetics.

One solution to the ethical problem of performing the narrations of others is the use of the writer’s own story as autoethnography. The author queries autoethnography’s tendency to tell “sad” stories and proposes an amusing story, exemplified by “The One about Princess Margaret”

(see Appendix). The conclusion is reached that the free and open environment of the Internet sidelines the usual tediousness of academic publishing and begins to explore new answers to questions posed about the evaluation and ethics of performative social science.

1. Background

A not so quiet revolution is currently taking place in the application of qualitative research in the social sciences. The use of tools from the arts and humanities, in both investigation of concerns and dissemination of data, is gaining critical mass (JONES, 2006). Photography, music, dance, poetry and so forth have been added to the researcher's investigative toolbox and "performance"—in the widest sense of the word—has become a catchphrase for the work of qualitative researchers no longer satisfied with typical PowerPoint conference presentations or journal restrictions. Those engaging in a new "performative social science" are changing these boundaries or pushing beyond them. These qualitative investigators are courageously developing arts-based research methods and dissemination techniques in order to both investigate deeper and reach wider audiences. This is good news, not only for participants in research studies, who can often be involved in producing subsequent performative reports, but also for the larger community to whom findings should be directed. [1]

Exploring the possibilities of a performative social science, for me, grew directly out of dissatisfaction with limitations in publication and presentation of my own biographic narrative data (JONES, 2006). I began, therefore, to look to the arts and humanities for possible tools which might be transposed for use into new forms of dissemination of narrative interview material. In doing so, my presentations became "performative". My published work had begun to reflect this new aesthetic (see JONES, 2004) as well. My expectation was that these sorts of efforts will do two things:

1. Honour the people who gave me interviews in the first place, and
2. Find new audiences for these stories, thus insuring that they are not just buried in academic journals. [2]

Through this shift in my efforts, I began to reconstruct the interview in DENZIN's terms: "not as a method of gathering information, but as a vehicle for producing performance texts and performance ethnographies about self and society" (DENZIN, 2001, p.24) where "text and audience come together and inform one another" (2001, p.26) in a relational way. In fact, LAW and URRY (2004) informed me that research methods in the social sciences do not simply describe the world as it is, but also enact it (2004, p.391). They are performative; they have effects; they make differences; they enact realities; and they can help to bring into being what they also discover (2004, pp.392-93). Indeed, "to the extent social science conceals its performativity from itself it is pretending to innocence that it cannot have" (2004, p.404). French educator Pierre LÉVY (1991) believes that profound changes are occurring in the way we acquire knowledge and supports the potential collective intelligence of human groups through emerging spaces of knowledge that are continuous, evolving and non-linear. This belief convinced me to eventually explore the World Wide Web as a new outlet for my performative works. [3]

2. Questions of Ethics

Performative social science creates new ethical questions for social scientists. Although interviewees normally agree to publication of their interview material (typically, in academic journals), what about the performance (and, therefore, further interpretation) of these materials and, indeed, their lives in other media? Should interviewees be included in approving, producing and even performing such "events"? Considering these ethical issues, I decided to investigate the use of autobiography as the raw material for a performative audio/visual production. My assumption was that by using myself and my own history, I could sidestep this particular ethical question and further develop my performative social science, subsequently returning to the original ethical question of performing the stories of others with fresh and alternative solutions based upon my own personal experiences. Initially, I felt a bit like the brave (or foolish?) scientist who first tries her/his vaccine on her/himself. [4]

3. Questions of Evaluation

At the same time, I began to explore the problems of evaluating our new performative social science. This grew out of the criticism that, in order to justify this work, it somehow needed to fit within a narrow framework of academic excellence and criteria.

My gut reaction was that, no, different criteria are needed to judge these new endeavours. I decided that outputs using tools from the arts should be judged by an arts-based philosophy—aesthetics—and I began to look for contemporary thinking in aesthetics that had resonance with work which was beginning to appear that could be considered performative social science. I came upon the Relational Aesthetics of Nicolas BOURRIAUD (2002) which seemed to fit with what we are attempting. [5]

Building upon BOURRIAUD's relational principles, I am able to begin to reform the questions that we might ask of our work:

1. Do we consider the effects that our fabrications have on our audiences as well, allowing for their own participation in a dialogical, creative social exchange?
2. Do projects involve the public as co-creators of our work?
3. Is there is a preference for contact and tactility?
4. Are there elements of interactivity?
5. Do projects bring people together to increase understanding?
6. Do they achieve modest connections, open up (one or two) obstructed passages, and connect levels of reality kept apart from one another?
7. Do they encourage the reduction of the inter-personal distance by the development of sensibility for the intuitive and associative aspect of communication?
8. What does this new kind of contact produce? [6]

I felt that performative social science, like BOURRIAUD's relational art, could also capture inter-subjectivity, being-together, the encounter and the collective elaboration of meaning, based in models of sociability, meetings, events, collaborations, games, festivals and places of conviviality as proposed by BOURRIAUD. Evaluating our work in his terms:

- Projects are considered successful if the work allows us to take part in the dialogue.
- Works are judged in terms of the inter-human relations that the projects show, produce, or give rise to.
- Performances should occupy time, rather than occupying space.

- The emphasis should be on collaborations.
- Attention needs to be paid to concepts of improvisation and spontaneity.
- We evaluate projects' outcomes in terms of co-operation, relationship, community and a broad definition of public spaces. [7]

WITTGENSTEIN admonished, "Don't look for the meaning of things, look for their use" (cited in SIMPSON, 2001). Relational art always leaves space open for the viewer to complete the experience. Sometimes that space is silent too. SONTAG (1967, p.XIII) explains that the artist's pursuit of "silence" is provoked by a "perennial discontent with language" where "thought reaches a certain high, excruciating order of complexity and spiritual seriousness. [Words become] crude and dysfunctional". According to SONTAG, this compels artists to attempt to demote language to the status of an event; to administer "silence" as a form of cultural shock therapy. These philosophies encourage us to see our texts as tools leading to performances, rather than text as an end in itself. Text becomes one stopping point along a continuum which also can include visual communication, music, dance, theatre and even silence. [8]

4. First Autoethnography, then Princess Margaret

Eventually, I got to autoethnography. Here's how. I create audio/visual productions based on my narrative interview work for use as conference presentations. Sometimes I am often asked about the "ethics" of "interpreting" through performance, someone else's story without their knowledge or specific permission. [*This sort of criticism ignores the assumed god given right of scholars to "interpret" as long as it is textual and buried in academic journals that no one reads much anyway.*] This seemed like a BIG question, nonetheless. I needed a creative answer to it. [9]

I began to read about autoethnography and joined the email discussion list. I grappled with the question, what are the key components of "good" autoethnography? In doing so, I kept returning to one puzzling question: Why does it seem that autoethnographies so frequently tell "sad" stories? Is this one way of reaching an audience, by emotionally capturing it? I am not unfamiliar with sad stories in my narrative research and I have put a lot of energy into telling other people's sad stories in order to engage audiences. I wondered at the time, are there other ways to write/perform autoethnography? Can you do autoethnography and tell a funny story or an

amusing story? Will it still work and have the same impact? I concluded that I would like to investigate whether an amusing story of my own could capture an individual's identity in the swirl and context of time and place, portraying identity as socially constructed, impacted upon by historical and time effects. [10]

Thus, "The One about Princess Margaret" was born—a tale about one night in my life in 1965. I remembered having just told that story to a friend and I thought it would work well as a test case of this particular question. In the process of writing it, I did a lot of the self-examination that any story based in our own experience requires. I confronted the tendency to gloss over small misrepresentations in order to put myself in a better light. I think I overcame that natural inclination. [11]

The story itself is a "party piece"—one that I have often told after dinners with friends. In performative pieces, I am particularly interested in how by focusing on and capturing a specific moment in time, the overarching gestalt of biographic narrators' lives can be expressed. By using the raw material of autoethnography, I quickly realised that I was confronted with creating—with a critical honesty—a reportage of "who I thought I was" at the time of the story. On the other hand, this story reinforces my belief that, in retrospect, our sense of self is fluid and flexible and always constructed by our experience in the present moment. [12]

As autoethnography, the piece describes its creator as a member of a culture at a specific time and place: being queer in 1965 on one night in New York City at a famous (straight) mod nightclub, "Arthur". Themes include being different, the celebration of being an outsider, seeing oneself from outside of the "norm", and the interior conflicts of "coming out" within a continuum as a (gay) male in a straight world. These observations are set within the flux and instability of a period of great social change, but which is often viewed in retrospect as consistent and definable. Being straight or being gay also can be viewed in a similar way within the wider culture's need to set up a sexual binary and force sexual "choice" decision-making for the benefit of the majority culture. Still, the piece does not unpack or analyse these phenomena, but rather, is descriptive, a reflective interpretation of the confusion and self-doubt that such rites-of-passage typically present for gay and lesbian youth. Moreover, the presentation itself engages its audience in its own introspection and interpretation in a creative way. As autoethnography, it documents minor transient

personal moments of everyday life: something transitory, lasting a day. Through the device of the fleeting moment, the story interrogates the certainties and uncertainties of the “norms” of modernity and sexuality. [13]

5. Producing Princess Margaret

After several months of writing and rewriting, I then began the process of turning the script into an audio/visual presentation; that took another three months time. The audio/visual production (“The One about Princess Margaret” can be viewed and/or downloaded at <http://video.google.co.uk/videoplay?docid=876851065821614838&hl=en-GB>) pays tribute to DENZIN’s post-modern narrative collage, the shattering of the traditional narrative line, a montage or *pentimento*—like jazz, which is improvisation—creating the sense that images, sounds and understandings blend together, overlapping, forming a composite, a new creation. Audio and visual elements seem to shape and define one another and an emotional gestalt effect is produced. The images and sounds are seen as combined and running in swift sequence, producing a dizzily revolving collection of events around a central or focused sequence, thus signifying the passage of time (c.f. DENZIN, 2001, p.29). It is documentary in style, creating an illusion that the audience has direct access to a particular reality and a personal relationship with it. Words, sights and sounds become a means or method for evoking the character of the narrator and the time. [14]

“The One about Princess Margaret” has now been shown at four UK universities (Bournemouth, Sussex, Cambridge and Bristol) to receptive audiences. After I show it, audience members come up to me and start talking about where they were and who they were in the 1960s. Younger audience members excitedly relate it to their parents’ generation—as though they have been given a special insight into their parents’ pasts. One time, however, an audience member asked, “What about scholarship? Where’s the scholarship?” I immediately replied, “It’s in the footnotes!” (See the script with footnotes in the Appendix) What I meant by that was that the scholarship had been backgrounded in order to foreground the more immediate experience of being a member of an audience, sitting in the dark without the usual academic expectations and with suspended disbelief. I believe that this approach produces possibilities for the reduction of the inter-personal distance by the development of sensibility for the intuitive and associative aspect of communication. What still pleases me most, however is when someone wants to talk about “production values” software

programmes, etc.—the “craft” of making it (more about this later in “9.”) and some of the more subtle cultural references embedded in the piece. [15]

6. From Performance to the Wide World Web

During his six-week sojourn as a visiting scholar to the Centre for Qualitative Research at Bournemouth University in the Summer of 2006, Dr. Daniel DOMÍNGUEZ (see a report of Daniel’s visit at <http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/iwcs/rescqrdrr.html>), first inspired me to upload the shortest of my video productions to the web (to *YouTube*, but later, I uploaded all of them to *Google Video* where the screen size is better and files are downloadable). When Daniel talked about *YouTube* that summer during his visit with us, I thought, well, put your work up and let’s see what happens. [16]

Daniel was very right in his summation that it would be an experiment to see what the viewings would be and how the larger world would react. Some viewers emailed me and asked if it was okay for their students to download it or if they could use the video in their teaching. Of course I said yes. This is the nature of the web, a free and open platform. It is an environment which sidelines the tediousness of usual academic publishing, reviewing, and a hierarchical and closed club of academics too often protecting their own turf. Shortly following this success with the first video, I uploaded six more videos. As of this writing, more than 700 people have viewed *Princess Margaret* on line; nearly 5,000 viewers have watched all seven of my videos which were uploaded a year ago in September 2006. [17]

The exponential growth of the Internet presents challenges to the methodological-philosophical foundations of knowledge. At the very heart of this matter is knowledge transfer. As the network age dawned, groups with the same needs and interests began to communicate directly across vast distances without the need of publisher, broadcaster or knowledge mediator. When knowledge is inscribed on paper, it encourages a hierarchical system. In the world of the Internet, conductors of information find themselves made redundant along with editors, curators and ticket collectors. [18]

French educator Pierre LÉVY (1991) believes that profound changes are occurring in the way we acquire knowledge and supports the potential collective intelligence of human groups through emerging spaces of knowledge that are continuous, evolving

and non-linear. LÉVY states that since the end of the 19th Century the cinema has given us a kinetic medium for representation (LÉVY, 2003, p.3). In fact, “we think by manipulating mental models which, most of the time, take the form of images. This does not mean the images resemble visible reality, they are more of a dynamic map-making” (LÉVY, 2003, p.4). By extending our potential beyond the usual journals and books when seeking outlets for our findings, to new technologies and knowledge providers (such as fugitive literature, web pages, web logs, personal narratives) we open the doors to new understandings and resources. [19]

7. Then why a Published Version of “The One about Princess Margaret”?

The reasons for a “published” version of the script of “The One about Princess Margaret” are two-fold; first, I wanted a written document that would act as a reference for the video production; second, I wanted to document the research that went into writing the script through the use of footnotes. Footnotes (rather than endnotes or no notes at all) harken the reader back to academic practice of the 1960s (the historical setting of the piece) when they were plentiful in scholarship. I also find that the use of footnotes on the page (as well as other “interjections” more generally such as boxes, comments, images, graphics, links, etc.) create an active dialogue between the author and the reader and this is something that I am also very interested in exploring. How do we “speak” to our readers when we write “academic” texts? How do we contribute to BARTHES’ belief that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author” (BARTHES, 1967)? [20]

7.1 “What Programme did you Use? Where did you Find the Images?”

The use of the lyric from Bob DYLAN’s song, “*Rolling Stone*”, which opens the script (and is heard faintly in the backing track in the audio/visual) is ironic on several levels. The fact that he speaks of a “*princess on a steeple*” fits nicely with the story’s title character. The “*pretty people, drinkin’ thinkin’ the got it made*” refers to youth culture (of any era) getting their first tastes of freedom, usually lubricated with alcohol. It is particularly ironic that the DYLAN song itself had its public debut in the same year and at the same location in which this story takes place (see footnote 1 in the script). [21]

The song, “*A day in the life of a fool*”, becomes a leitmotif running throughout the production. For me, it represented in a paradoxical way how we view ourselves in retrospect. This particular rendition of the song uses the English lyric written for

Manha De Carnaval (Theme from "Black Orpheus") by Antonio Carlos JOBIM and Luis BONFÁ, recorded in the 1960s by SINATRA amongst others. The meaning of the lyric can represent a backward glance at the foolishness of youth, but also a reflection on the foolishness of fame and position in society that is represented in the narrative. The title line repeats throughout the storytelling, reminding the audience that this is only a day, only a memory of a day. The sequence that follows the narration, where contemporaneous photos, depicting the settings and characters alluded to by the narrator, flash by in rapid sequence, are accompanied by a contemporary modern version of the song playing in full on the soundtrack. The updated rendition of the song reminds the audience that youthful exuberance and perceived cultural changes are rites-of-passage for every generation. [22]

The technicalities of the production deserve mentioning. As DOMÍNGUEZ asks in another setting, "What programme did you use? Where did you find the images?... It must have taken you a long time to do it, mustn't it?..." (DOMÍNGUEZ, 2007, par.14). Very early in the process, while the script for the narration was just beginning to be written, a visual landscape of psychedelic projections came to mind as a backdrop for the narrative. I explored what was available, found a short (less than one minute) kaleidoscope moving image and then built the 20 minute long visualisation that forms the background to the storytelling upon this short piece, using software to morph and extend the initial graphic file to the 20 minutes required by the narration. I wanted to capture the mind-altering graphic projections of the 1960s, but also allow the narrator's voice to become the central focus, a bit like listening to a radio programme. Nonetheless, the psychedelic projections compel the audience forward towards the punch line and, finally, to the dénouement of flashing images that reinforce the narrated scenes previously only imagined. The hypnotic qualities of these projections were commented upon by many viewers after the performances. Snippets of pop songs (all original recordings from the year 1965) fade in and out during the narration. Sound effects produce the heightened atmosphere and underscore the narrative. [23]

The visual production begins with black and white psychedelics, slowly changing to colour, followed by a riot of colour then back to black and white at the end of the narration, just before the photographic images are shown. This lent a feeling of theatricality to the production and supported the mostly black and white photos in

the final section. Photographs from the 1960s (including ones of the “characters” described by the narrator) were compiled to form this final part of the production—a three and a half minute photo montage in swift progression (DENZIN’s post-modern narrative collage), accompanied by a contemporary rendition of the song, *“A Day in the Life of a Fool”*. Early versions of the production were comprised of two parts: the visual images as films and stills embedded in a PowerPoint platform and the audio track engineered using Music Maker. Later, I combined the two parts (audio and visual) into a movie file using conversion software which was then uploaded to the Internet. [24]

The piece is 23 minutes long, exactly the same length as a primetime sitcom (without the commercials). The title itself is a play on the titles for *“Friends”* episodes (e.g., “The One Where Rachel Finds Out”) and humorous stories (*“Have you heard the one about ...?”*). I wanted the production to be clearly placed within the genre of popular culture, but reinvent it for an academic setting. Most conference presentations allow for 30 minutes; this gave me just enough time for a short discussion following the 23 minute showing. [25]

8. Did I Answer my Questions?

Questions of the ethics and of evaluation of performative social science began this discussion. I wondered about performing the stories of others, seeking their permission (even their participation in the production), then sidestepped this issue by using my own story instead. This personal journey has been an interesting one—being open about who I am, telling others who I am in an audience setting and then, finally, opening up my story to the whole world through the Internet. It has been a procedure and exercise in gaining a sense of personal security at each stage of the process. Incorporating such a staged progression of involvement and reflection when seeking permission to use and include the narrations of others in our performances seems one way to tackle this ethical issue. By engaging with those whom we study in a “process” of production, they will be afforded opportunities to decide what to reveal/how much to reveal to an audience. This experience itself can prove transforming and self-affirming for them. [26]

In evaluating the piece, I ask, "What does this new kind of contact produce?" In this case, by moving the piece from writing to production to performance and, finally, to the World Wide Web and an international audience, I was able to produce a work which is malleable, openended and changing and that included feedback and revision at every step of the journey. Fortunately, the use of technology makes this kind of contact practical, intuitive and associative. Terms such as co-operation, relationship, community and a broad definition of public spaces (particularly the virtual space of the Internet) were foregrounded, encouraging me to see my text as a tool leading to performance, lending new powers to ethnography to recover yet interrogate the meanings of lived experiences. [27]

I asked if there are other ways to write autoethnography that might include telling a funny or amusing story. "The One about Princess Margaret" is just that—a one-liner really (*"I didn't mind at all, giving up my seat for your friend"*) told as a "shaggy dog" story. The first time that the production was shown, it played to a silent audience. Afterwards in discussion, one audience member commented that he didn't feel that he had permission to laugh in an academic setting. Sad as this was, in future showings to academic audiences I introduced the audio/visual by giving the audience permission to laugh. This phenomenon may be, in fact, at the crux of the matter and why it seems so much more humanising to find alternative outlets for our work, including the Internet. [28]

As autoethnography, I think that the piece meets BENNETT's (2004) requirements:

- An analytical/objective personal account
- About the self/writer as part of a group or culture
- Often a description of a conflict of cultures
- Often an analysis of being different or an outsider
- Usually written to an audience not a part of the group
- An attempt to see self as others might
- An opportunity to explain differences from the inside
- An explanation of how one is "othered". [29]

Recently, I was listening to a radio programme and was startled to hear a piece by a classical composer who was unknown to me. I say “startled” because my hubris assumes that I have heard just about all of the classical composers after a lifetime of listening to music. The composition was Alfred SCHNITTKE’s (1934-1998) “Concerto for Choir”. I scurried to the Internet to find out about him. Noted, above all, for his hallmark “polystylistic” musical idiom, SCHNITTKE wrote in a wide range of genres and styles. The composer once said, “The goal of my life is to unify serious music and light music, even if I break my neck in doing so”. Ah, I identify with that! To paraphrase SCHNITTKE: “*The goal of my life is to unify serious scholarship and popular culture, even if I break my neck in doing so*”. “The One about Princess Margaret”—the research, the original script, the hours of production involved in the audio/visual presentation, the performances and feedback from audiences and, finally, its rebirth within the community and broadly defined public spaces of the World Wide Web—contributes to a performative social science and a *relational* scholarship with renewed signs of vitality, sociability and yes, even fun. [30]

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APPENDIX

The One about Princess Margaret¹

*"Princess on the steeple and all the pretty people
They're drinkin', thinkin' that they got it made"*

— Bob Dylan, 'Like a Rollin' Stone'²

©1965 Warner Bros. Inc.

NARRATOR (Voice Over)

The peculiar thing about the 1960s is that people think that the decade happened all at once, as though we woke up one morning to some sort of overnight transformation. We did not. Instead, we found ourselves, in transitory increments, participating in life differently, listening to new music, creating our own pastiche of alternative clothes to wear, and going to novel places or old haunts with new agendas. One cold Friday night in the autumn of 1965 my friends and I decided to take the train from our hometown of Philadelphia to New York City. Simon had moved there to become an actor (as one did) and we wanted to see him again. Ross had his father's Playboy Club card (we could use it to get free drinks) and I wanted to go to a disco club³ that had been opened by Sybil Burton, recently divorced from Richard.⁴

¹ The audio/visual production created from this script is available online at: <http://video.google.co.uk/videoplay?docid=876851065821614838&hl=en-GB>.

² 'Like a Rolling Stone' was recorded on June 15, 1965, in Studio A at 799 Seventh Avenue, then the New York headquarters of Columbia Records, where I worked as the coordinator of new releases. I was invited to sort through a stack of records and demos that were to be junked. Among them I discovered a gem: a studio-cut acetate of 'Like a Rolling Stone'. I carefully packed it into an empty LP jacket, carried it home and that weekend played it more than once in my apartment. The effect was the same as it had been the first time I had experienced it. Exhilaration. Heart pounding. Body rolling — followed by neighbors banging on the walls in protest. Then, on Sunday evening, it came to me. I knew exactly where the song could be fully appreciated. [At the time, the hottest new disco in Manhattan was a place called Arthur, on East 54th Street.] The D.J. was very polite when asked if he would kindly play the acetate. The effect was seismic. People jumped to their feet and took to the floor, dancing the entire six minutes. — Shaun Considine, *The New York Times*, (Dec. 04 2004) "The Hit We Almost Missed" http://www.b12partners.net/ml/archives/2004/12/the_new_york_ti.html and personal communication).

³ Arthur's silent partners were famous—Mike Nichols, Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein, Edward Villella and Roddy McDowall.

⁴ "The impact of the Mod-era discotheque reinvigorated American nightlife. It inaugurated a second wave of disco development that was more populist, democratic, and in tune with American popular culture. The flagship club of the new era was conceived by a jilted woman as a stylish act of revenge. Overnight Sybil stole the headlines from Dick and Liz to become the queen of the international discotheque scene"—Braunstein, P. (1999) *Disco*. *American Heritage Magazine*, 50: 7 (November 1999). (Available at: http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1999/7/1999_7_43.shtml)

This flagship club of the new mod era was called, 'Arthur', supposedly because one of the Beatles (either Ringo or George, depending on who tells the story) was questioned by a reporter who pointed at his hair and asked, "What do ya call that?" The Beatle responded, "Arthur". In fact, the Beatles had just made the film, 'Help' that summer and had appeared in New York's Shea Stadium in August.

Sybil Burton had remarried—a hairdresser/singer/actor from Ohio named Jordon Christopher who was more than a decade younger than her. You see, because Richard had run off with Liz Taylor, Sybil really was on a rampage of revenge. By taking this plunge, Christopher eventually managed to stretch out his fifteen minutes of fame into twenty years of steady work by catching the eye of several film directors.

Being queer wasn't some overnight transformation either. In 1965, it would be another four years before New York's Stonewall Riots and gay liberation on front pages. Closets abounded. Gay bars in my city of Philadelphia were raided by the police frequently. "Coming out" back then meant the stealth required to get out of one of these establishments unseen or at least without harassment from the cops. Being gay was something you did in the dark, on the side, in spite of daylight normalities.

I had a huge crush on Simon, who was straight, before he left for New York. So bad a crush, in fact, that I dated Billie. A year later, Simon phoned me from New York to say that he was in a relationship with an older man and that they were living together in Greenwich Village. By then I was trapped in a marriage with Billie. Life is full of irony.

But back to that cold autumn night, 1965: we all decided to go to New York—me, Billie, Ross (who lived near me and was childhood friends with my art college roommate) and Graham, another of Ross's boyhood friends, a brooding, strapping guy, the kind I liked to meet up with on those dark, on the side, nights. Later, Graham and I did 'hook up' as they used to say and actually had our first time in bed together in Simon's apartment in the West Village. After that, I went home and told the wife, "I don't think our marriage is working". My shrink agreed with a sigh of inevitability.

Billie was stunning. She did 'a little modelling on the side'—a phrase used often then and even sung in "Bells are Ringing". She worked by day for an advertising firm; by night we spent our time with friends in an infamous local Philadelphia bar called Dirty Franks. The marginal, the creative, the wannabes—all either future

members of Twelve Step programmes or eventually prematurely dead—attended nightly. They called the two of us, ‘The King and Queen of Frank’s’. If they only had known who the queen was! (If I had only known who the queen was.)

I worked for a small chain of trendy boutiques doing window displays and so forth. Billie often modelled for them and they even let me borrow clothes for her to wear from time to time:

“Return ‘fresh’ by Monday A.M., please!”

I had ‘borrowed’ a particularly wild black dress for her to wear to New York—kind of Spanish in style with a deep flounce at the bottom and matching shawl. She looked great in anything, but particularly looked stunning in the most outrageous. One night she went out in Baby Doll pyjamas, Courrage-type tights, long false eyelashes and makeup; no one even guessed that she was dressed in sleepwear.

We keenly sensed that things were changing around us—fashion, music, lifestyles, etc.,—and we wanted to be at the forefront of all of that. So we experimented. We had to be there where and when things were happening. This was all part and parcel of the things that eventually led up to the Summer of Love in 1968⁵—the culmination of the 60s, but we couldn’t have predicted that; rather we partook piecemeal.

Arriving in New York City, we headed for the Playboy Club, a place that was intense and strange. It was my first-time seeing Playboy Bunnies up close; they were other-worldly, not quite human, a bit like the time that I met Ethel Merman in the flesh—a flesh that looked more like waxworks. It was crowded, but the drinks were free thanks to Ross’s Dad. Simon met up with us there. He was still the most interesting of all of us really—an intelligent, handsome son of a Jewish glove manufacturer, educated at Penn and just beginning to find himself in New York. I was desperate to get out of the Playboy Club and on to Arthur, away from this strangely too-close-to-the-bone palace of heterosexuality and on to an alternative mod paradise and the potential, I assumed,

⁵ *“It was the year of sex and drugs and rock and roll; it was also the year of the Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy assassinations, Prague Spring, the Chicago convention, the anti-war movement and the Tet Offensive, the student rebellion that paralyzed France, Civil Rights, the generation gap, the beginning of the end for the Soviet Union, and the birth of the women’s movement. 1968: That world-changing year of social upheaval, when television’s impact on global events first became apparent and where simultaneously, in Paris, Prague, London, Berkeley, Chicago, New York and all over the globe uprisings spontaneously occurred. 1968 encompassed the worlds of youth and music, politics, war, economics, assassinations, riots, and demonstrations—and the media—how we got to where we are today.” (Martin KURLANSKY, 1969 *The Year that Rocked the World*, Random House 2005).*

for a more inclusive world that I had always longed for. This interior conflict was one that would trouble me for some time. After several stiff scotches we went back out into the streets of New York, eventually finding Arthur on 54th Street⁶.

There was a queue (or 'line' as we called it then) to get in. We decided it was worth the wait, this new club that brought the British attitude that we were just beginning to hear about in music and see in film to the streets of New York. This was the club where a few years later Mickey Deans, the night-manager, met Judy Garland⁷, eventually married her and took her to England where she died.

When we got to the entrance, the bouncer came up to our group and barked,

Bouncer

"Sorry, but I can't let a group of four lads and one bird in."

Narrator

He was speaking "English" at us! Not knowing what to do (and now having finally heard a British accent in the flesh) we were certainly eager to be let in. Out of nowhere, ad libbing as I spoke, I alleged:

"Oh, this guy (Ross) is my manager and" (pointing at Graham), "the big one is my body guard. Billie and I are staying with Simon while we're in New York."

The doorman went back through the entrance. A moment or two passed, and Ross warned,

"Don't look around now, but I think that the bouncer is talking to Sybil Burton about you just inside the door."

They were having a lively conversation and pointing towards our group.

⁶ Arthur was built on the site of the by-then defunct El Morocco and inspired by a trendy London discotheque named the Ad Lib.

⁷ Garland had known Mickey for two years when out of the blue, she announced their engagement. They enjoyed each other's company and he told her that if they married she would not have to work again—unless she wanted to. Judy Garland married Mickey Deans at Chelsea Registry Office on 15 March 1969. (c.f. <http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/sherwoodtimes/judyshow.html>)

A few minutes had passed when Sybil Burton herself came out through the swinging double doors and right up to me, gushing.

Sybil

"Oh, I am terribly sorry that you had to wait! Please do come right in and I shall find you some seats."

Narrator

It was a funny time, 1965. A man having long hair was still a big deal and not all that common. Remember the fuss around the Beatles and their hairdos? You just didn't see that many guys with long hair and dressed in a 'mod' way on the streets in America. In fact, there was only one shop in all of Philadelphia where you could find mod clothes for men that began to approach what we were seeing in magazines and films⁸, mostly from England. I was one of those guys.

Because things were changing so rapidly and those who had their finger on the pulse were few, there was a kind of natural assumption that if someone looked the part, they got the role. Looking back, I imagine that Sybil Burton (being relatively new as a club owner in New York) fell into that trap when vetting us for entrance into her establishment. We looked like somebody, so we must be somebody.

Sybil (I am assuming that we're on a first name basis now) ushered us into the main room of the club where a rock band was playing⁹. She took us to a table which sat on its own next to the bandstand. There were smoke-tinted mirrors around the entire room, reminiscent of the location's posher days, with banquettes lining the walls, creating a dance floor in the centre and additional little tables with stools. It wasn't too crowded; the club was just beginning to fill up. There must have been flashing lights and psychedelic projections on the walls, but I can't remember.

⁸ The film "Blowup" by Italian director, Michelangelo Antonioni, was released the following year in 1966; it epitomised the 'outsider' view of the mod era in 'swinging' London. This film had particular resonance for me.

⁹ Sybil Burton chose the band, the Wild Ones, led by Jordon Christopher, to be the opening band for Arthur. They were just a group. They never had a hit, but their big song was 'Wild Thing', written by Chip Taylor, brother of actor John Voight and a performer in his own right. During a trip to New York, Larry Page heard the demo of Wild Thing, and the English band The Troggs recorded it in 1965, turning it into a worldwide hit. (<http://www.classicbands.com/troggs.html>).

Sybil had the waiter take our drinks order and scotch arrived in large goblets. Every drink came in a goblet. Every drink, no matter what you got, which we thought was the coolest thing. Sybil took care of every detail. A bill for the drinks never followed. Jordon Christopher was spotted in leather trousers, a skinny dark-haired guy with long hair about the same age as us. Sybil was older than us and dressed more like the over-thirty and, therefore, not-to-be-trusted adults we encountered in everyday life. Still, she was quite beautiful in person; photographs in the press had never done her justice. Close up, I could see quite clearly what had attracted a man like Richard Burton to her in the first place.

When the first free drinks arrived at our specially positioned spot in the club, we realised that we had better maintain our charade, if for no other reason than to keep the free booze flowing. It was agreed that when I moved around, went to the Men's Room and so forth, that Graham would follow me, standing outside the door, arms folded, with darting eyes and looking serious. This seemed to work; we noticed that we were being casually watched by staff. They were probably just trying to figure out which band they had seen me in.

Sybil came by our table from time to time:

Sybil

"Is everything all right?"

Narrator

At one point she sat down next to me. I causally remarked, "You know my grandparents all came from Wales and I am told that I look very Welsh".

Sybil

"Dahling!" "There are *thousands* who look just like you in Wales!"

Narrator

My first encounter with British sarcasm.

Things were certainly going more than according to plan. In fact, all that unfolded that night in Arthur was the direct result of an off-the-cuff, momentary rejoinder to

the possibility of not being admitted to the club at all. Still, we were a bit nervous, sure that we would be found out and have to pay a bar bill that, by now, we certainly didn't have the cash to cover.

After about an hour, Sybil came by again and sat next to me:

Sybil

"I hate to do this, but I'm afraid that I am going to have to ask you to move. I've just had a telephone call from Princess Margaret's people. She's at a ball at the Waldorf¹⁰ and will be coming to the club shortly. I'm terribly afraid that I am going to ask you to give up these seats for her. Would you mind awfully if I found you another place?"

Narrator

I mumbled, "Oh, okay" or something like that as Sybil ushered us to a section of banquette just to the side of our 'special' table. Here, though, we would have to sit with 'ordinary' patrons next to us.

I turned to the stranger now seated next to me and said,

"Princess Margaret is coming!"

"Yeah, right" was his dubious response.

Sybil sent a fresh round of drinks to our new table to thank us for being so understanding. After about 15 minutes or so, Princess Margaret, Lord Snowdon and their entourage of about 20 people dressed to the nines in ball gowns, tiaras and decorations, descended upon Arthur. They were immediately ensconced at 'our' old table near the bandstand. Lord Snowden (all 5' 3" of him), didn't sit, but immediately started dancing with one of the ball gowned ladies, pushing her around the dance floor to rock music as though he were still at a formal ball. His head was about the same height as her overflowing bosom, creating quite a funny picture. During the

¹⁰ "Friday, Nov. 19th, 7:45 p.m. Princess Margaret and Lord Snowdon arrive at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel for the dinner and ball given by the English-Speaking Union of the USA, the Pilgrims of the US and the US Churchill Fund. Dress: White Tie and Decorations". (Courtesy of the Royal Archives and with the permission of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II for use of this material).

Jordon Christopher, was relegated to the end of the table as, perhaps, his position deserved. As I approached, they were all facing me.

I leaned over the table in front of Sybil and emoted,

"Thanks so much for making tonight possible for me. I so seldom get to go out in public and not be bothered."

She smiled back.

I then concluded, throwing a glance Princess Margaret's way,

"... and I didn't mind at all—giving up my seat for your friend".

This was received with a stunned silence. Not missing a beat, I immediately turned on my heels and made a dash for the exit and my own waiting 'entourage'.

We spilled out of the club into a chilly, drizzling New York night. Laughing while skipping up the rain licked streets, Billie threw her shawl over her head. We went back to Simon's first-time-in-New York, struggling actor's small apartment. We stayed up for some time, repeating the evening's events over and over again to insure that they would not seem a dream when we awoke the next morning.