

Travels With

PORGIE

Part Two

Stalking the

**FIRESIGN
THEATRE**

in Monterey



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IT'S JUST THIS LITTLE CHROMIUM SWITCH HERE

chromiumswitch.org

Sheet Metal Memories of Cannery Row, The Big Shoe, Gawking With The Geeks and The Taunting of the Lemurians

Author's Note: As the de facto correspondent for the Firesign Theatre fan's webzine, *It's Just This Little Chromium Switch Here*, I was privileged to witness the troupe's pre-performance preparations at the grand Golden State Theatre in Monterey, California in April of 2009. I stuck around for the show, too. The following is my account of the events of the day. Well, my account of the evening actually. If you want to hear about the morning and afternoon of Show Day you'll have to go back and read Part I, a painful task to be sure, but if I had to do it, well, it seems only fair that you do too. Again, thanks, Tom, for the space on your site for my blathering. Someday there will be Internet Standards and I'll be screwed. Until then, though...

The Seekers are at the Door

What would happen if, theoretically, all of your Facebook friends descended on a usually laconic, scenic, sun-splashed coastal California town at a predestined time and met at a predestined address? If your Facebook friends are anything like mine (and they are) it would be a pretty weird convergence of energy, wouldn't it?

Factor in that these friends are friends for basically one reason; A more than passing interest in a not-quite-obscure-but-nonetheless-sometimes-obtuse comedy group. We're talking about a comedy group whose career has spanned four decades and featured more on-again-off-again sightings than those pesky Lemurian unicyclists. Take all this into account and it's a better than good chance your Strange-O-Meter beeps a little brighter. It's fairly certain that even the literary-minded City Fathers here in Steinbeck Country would get a little skittish with all these self-proclaimed Bozos walking the streets. Heck, even I kept my hand on my wallet and I was *one of them*.

Now, I'm not saying fans of the Firesign Theatre should be feared, on the contrary, they are, in general, an amusing and harmless lot. Most of them pass for "normal" at first glance, and many hold real jobs. Several "Fireheads" fall into the "professional" category. You know, doctors, lawyers and pharmacists. But, getting a thousand of them in one place at the same time definitely realigns the Universe's Cosmic Smirk to a new longitude and latitude, at least temporarily. I had a feeling standing in the queue outside the theater an hour before show time that we were "scaring the straights." That's not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it made me feel kind of proud of myself.

But, here we were. All of us, a little older perhaps, but here just the same, with golden ticket in hand, ready to re-acquaint ourselves with our Dear Friends.

Many of us brought along our young sprouts, exposing a second (and even third) generation to an exhibition of wit and merriment that had been carried fondly from a hazy epoch we, who claim to have been there, insist changed the world.

Finally, these "newbies," with no recollection of moon landings or Dick Nixon, would see for themselves the reason phrases like, "He's no fun, he fell right over," or "Only to ten, Mudhead" elicited squeals of laughter from Aunt Kathy at the dinner table — and how koans like, "Why does the Porridge Bird lay his eggs in the air?" had worked their way into the family lexicon.

We would at last be able to share what even the Library of Congress considers a National Treasure with the young and/or uninitiated. Maybe, just maybe, we might even make a little more sense to these sons, daughters, nieces, nephews and grand kids when they got a chance to see first-hand, the Four or Five Crazy Guyz spill the surreal over us.

We all, young and old, had our tickets, but it's up to each Bozo to follow their own yellow rubber line to The Funway. In this theater, you're on your own.

Here, on the stage, it's all knuckles and know-how

There are a thousand reasons the Firesign Theatre (Phil Austin, Peter Bergman, David Ossman and Phil Proctor) still resonate with people who first heard their radio shows and albums, lo, those many years ago. But, when the house lights dimmed and the four men took their positions on the stage apron, loose-leafed scripts in hand, it became evident that it is their craft that has held sway over their audience and kept their legacy alive across the span of time. Bits are forgotten, lost in the cultural clutter of catch phrases and sledge-hammered fruit, but art carries life.

To the audience looking through the one-way mirror that we as witnesses are allowed, there were more than the corny gags (which abound) or familiar punch lines. There is *something* about the Firesign Theatre and the mirth they make that touches a deeper chord. A sense of something larger, universal and *necessary*. Truths wrapped in parody, a consciousness shared in double-entendre. A connection to the world and with each other. A shared wink and a conspiratorial chuckle. A feeling of 'we are not alone' and 'we were *not* wrong and we *are* all bozos on this bus.' And, we're still here, and it is all still terribly funny.

It is unlikely that a "comedy act" can illicit these feelings or reveal us to ourselves in such a manner without a sense

of craft. Pigs don't just live in trees, they have to be coaxed out onto the limb, and in a skillful way to boot. It is no small feat to embrace chaos and absurdity and to somehow make it your ally. The Firesign Theatre take comfort in the spontaneous and unexpected. They pluck these ideas out of the cosmos and weave them into ornate tapestries. Scenes and playlets layered with meaning both frivolous and deep. They understand the importance of not understanding. They realize that you can make a watch melt, but it's more useful if it can still show you something, or better yet, make you laugh.

What occurred when the players took to the stage under the lights was not unplanned. The material was to be familiar to the audience, and as adoring as that audience may be, it would still be a challenge for even the most seasoned of performers to wring laughs from lines that the guy in Row G knew as well (or maybe better) than they did themselves. Particularly if the group in question had not played to a room full of warm bodies in, well, a long fucking time.

Forward, Into The Past...

All we the audience knew as we settled into our plush seats at the Grand Old Dame of a theater that evening is that we were about to see the Firesign Theatre perform a show commemorating the 40th anniversary of the appearance of Nick Danger, Third Eye. Their most enduring, and in many ways, most endearing character.

Nick (played by Phil Austin) is a noir-do-well private dick with little brawn and even less brain who somehow manages to throw routine radio plays into another dimension and come out smelling like a rose, or pickle, as the case may be.

The concept provides each Firesigner with an evolving character and role that suits them perfectly. Phil Proctor is the Peter Lorre-ish nemesis, Rocky Rococo (White Album, anyone?), who tries desperately to be evil and dangerous but somehow ends up having his plans foiled by Nick before the last page of the script, if one exists that is (you never know.) He is, by my estimation, the most lovable villain in entertainment history.

Peter Bergman is the hard-boiled police detective, Lt. Bradshaw, who is constantly irritated by the inept Nick and seems to always be left with mud tracked across his nice clean floor and egg on his face.

David Ossman is both narrator, Dwight Yeast, and the Butler Who May Or May Not Have Done It, Catherwood, who oversees The Old Same Place. Ossman's character(s) blur the lines between the reality of the show and the reality of the reality being passed off as reality. He serves as something of a Virgil to Nick in this particular Inferno.

The object of Nick's desire (and Bradshaw's, and Rococo's and even Dwight's) is the dame with the great gams, Susan Underhill, or is it Betty Jo Belilosky? No matter, everyone knows her as Nancy (yes, another Beatles reference) and she is a gal who gets around, as she's been played at one time or another by just

about everybody in the group. We've all known girls like that.

We, the audience, assumed that with the show following on the heels of the recently released and beautifully packaged *Box of Danger*, a four-disc collection of both familiar and rare episodes of the signature series, that the focus of the night's performance would be Nick. We, the audience that is, were to have our expectations challenged. Something else crept out from The Shadows, something we weren't expecting. Something conjured by the 4 or 5 Guyz in clandestine writing sessions that led to Monterey.

So, Bozo, How Can You Be In Two Places At Once and Be The Dwarf Electrician When Everything You Know is Wrong?

All right, so I cheated. I was one of the lucky Fireheads to get a peek at what was in store for the evening when, posing as a correspondent for *Chromium Switch*, I gained access to the morning/afternoon show run-through. I knew that what was being attempted on stage was a Herculean task. I also knew that it was going to go off without a hitch.

Somehow, these guys were going to cut and paste material from a body of work four decades in the making into a



coherent performance. They were attempting to touch on every stage of their storied career (including their NPR and XM Radio shows) and do it in two acts. Live. In front of people. Pretty ballsy, if you ask me.

How do you set the stage for such a grand undertaking? This was to be a daredevil jump that would put the fear of Fudd in even a pro like Reebus Caneebus. Well, like everything else you've ever done, you snatch it from circumstance and you turn it into art.

The backdrop chosen was an original canvas from the Golden State Theatre's previous life as a Vaudeville venue, one of several stops from Pomona to San Francisco for troupers of another era. It looked splendid as it ever-so-slightly rippled in the stage door draft.

What's this? Four red velvet and gilded royal thrones left over from some long gone melodrama? Perfect! Line them up so that each group member has his spot. Austin on the left, Proctor, Bergman and then Ossman at the end (who casually leaves his wardrobe changes, such as Ben Bland's argyle sweater, hanging from the spire of his royal chair.)

For Act Two, a simple table with four chairs where The Guyz can kibbutz and riff on today's headlines, just like they would in KPFK's studio back in the day. The simplicity was stunning, as only simplicity can be when left in the hands of masters. Give Picasso a bicycle seat and handlebars and he'll give you a sculpture of a bull. Give the Firesign guys an old haunt's basement and they'll build a theater of the mind. We know it can be done, because we watched them do it. We are a very lucky audience.

Our luck started with the house lights blinking and then going down. The set revealed, the venerable group standing at their microphones and The Audience That Waited In Great Anticipation For This Night unleashing their long-held cheers. The warm applause surely must have woken some of the dusty Vaudeville ghosts in the balcony. The clapping of hands and stomping of feet causing the painted backdrop to ruffle again. The Firesign Theatre has taken the stage.

I must confess that once the familiar sound of their voices launched into the set, I lost the desire to "review" the performance. Even for a fan's website like Chromium Switch, where my prejudice would be forgiven, I just ceased wanting to 'report' anything. It would just be preaching to the choir and I, quite simply, lost myself in the

show. Sure, that's a cop out but I told you from the start I was a crappy correspondent.

According to the program, Act One began with *Forward!* and slid into a piece called *Oz Rewound*. From there the group melded *High School Madness* from *Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me the Pliers* into the Dr. Memory segment of *I Think We're All Bozos On This Bus*.

There was a bit of wandering from the script during the *Bozos* bit when Bergman, really getting deep into his character, looked right at Austin and shouted, "Mr. President, where can I get a fucking job?!?" Austin's President, unflummoxed by the two syllable script variance simply replied, in character, "Many of you often ask about the

fucking job displacement program," and the show rolled merrily into intermission as Proctor and Ossman chuckled from their thrones at the giddiness of their partners upstage. In fact, everybody rolled merrily into intermission. Even the souvenir hawkers were having a great time. The lovely Kathy O'Mara conducting commerce in the lobby while chatting up the geeks who came a-gawkin'. I mean, you know it's a good night when everyone is having a blast *during the intermission*.

The vibe in the building was very much a Dear Friends

and Family atmosphere. The warmth of the audience returned in kind by not only the performers, but the support folks handling the concessions. I cannot conceive that there was a solitary soul who would rather be elsewhere. I remember thinking, "I bet at this particular moment, there is no other place on the planet with a thousand people having this much fun." And the evening wasn't over yet.

What is Reality and Why Isn't There Any Around Here?

Ben Bland's Matinee opened up the second half of the show and segued into the "conversational improvisation" part of the evening that found The Guyz huddled around a table littered with newspapers, magazines and bottles of water. It was this part of the show that drove home the point that these four men could read the phone book and kill you with their Revelation of the Absurd wherever it may appear, which is of course, everywhere.

If there were any doubt coming into the show that the self-imposed exile of TFT had dulled their comedic chops it was quickly, and most assuredly, dispelled as they played off each other and followed whatever flight of fancy struck



them during the loose, unscripted portion of the set. You feel almost voyeuristic as you see with your own eyes and hear with your own ears as a quartet of the finest comedic minds write their bits right there on the stage. It is an awe inspiring demonstration of silliness with an intelligence quotient.

The Guyz brought the proceedings to their zenith with impeccable performances *The Old Same Place* and *The American Pageant*. As the roller coaster gained speed the actors got looser and by the time they played the coda their scripts were tossed to the wind — ink jet printed brilliance on white reams littered into the roaring crowd like a Buddy Guy encore, flinging guitar picks to outstretched hands. Unfortunately for me, the geezers no longer had the arm strength to get a keepsake up into the balcony.

The ovation was sincere and warm, and the group seemed genuinely taken aback by its fervor. As they exited the stage there was an almost palpable feeling that they would have to do this again, and soon. How can you walk away from something that seems to mean so much to so many? It must certainly assure Austin, Bergman, Ossman and Proctor that their fate is sealed, their legacy entwined with the others. This Firesign thing has always been bigger than its individual parts.

Such a realization does nothing to dampen the accomplishments each has achieved on his own. They are four distinct and unique talents. But to deny the beast they become as a group would be a disservice to the muse, and to their audience, with whom an indestructible bond has been forged.

In recognition of that bond, the Firesign Theatre did something I had rarely seen any major act do in my forty years of concert-going. They set up at the concession counter in the lobby after the show and signed autographs, took pictures and generally schmoozed with their fans. It was as if we were all, indeed, Dear Friends. And it so very hard to say goodbye to Dear Friends.

Hollywood, Lemurians and a Babe In The Woods

In the months since the Monterey show it seems apparent that it's not quite time to close the book on the Firesign

Theatre just yet. Heartened by the success of *Forward Into The Past*, the group has scheduled a series of shows at the intimate Barnsdall Gallery Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard on October 14th, 15th, 16th and 17th of this year.

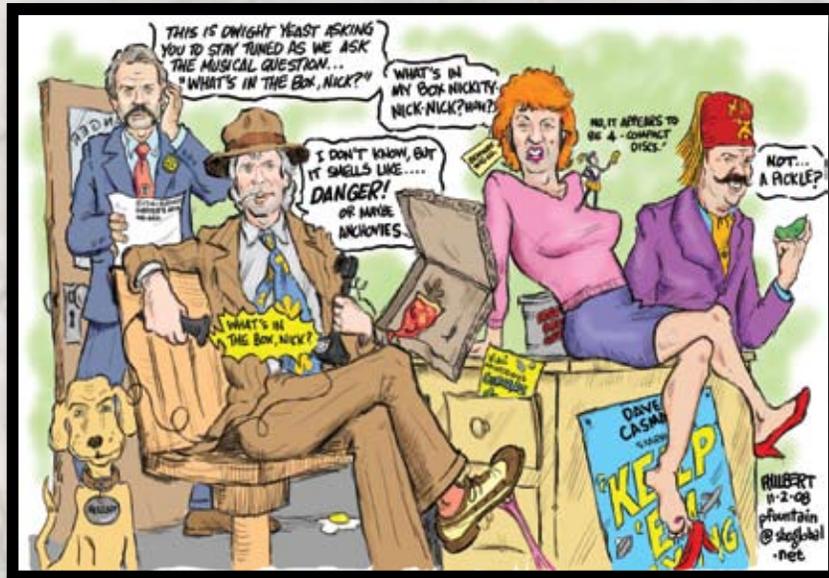
The shows will be part commemoration, part homecoming and, no doubt, sublime.



Another offshoot of the Monterey gig is that it seems to have encouraged Mr. Bergman to trod the boards with his own one-man show, *Seeing 2020, Sneaking Into The Future*. PB has been refining his act in front of appreciative gatherings in Ashland, Oregon and Mount Shasta, California. It is, naturally, a very funny evening. But, he may have pissed off some Dwellers in the Mountain with his references to Lemurian Women's Bitch Fighting. Granted, Lemurian Bitch

Fights are quite a hoot, but we here in the great wilds of Northern Californy try not to piss off the locals. Although, I feel confident that the Lemurians are OK with Bergman. It's rumored that *Everything You Know Is Wrong* is still on heavy rotation on Lemurian FM stations. Which would explain the laughter coming from under the mountain. Those Firesign guys, still out there scaring the straights. What can you do? They're a National Treasure, ask the Library of Congress.

Chromium Switch cartoonist, Phil "Philbert" Fountain, will be attending the Friday and Saturday shows at the Barnsdall. He'll be looking for Chromium Switch and Facebook friends, and crossing the street when he spots one. He'd love to chat and bare his soul, if he can get his socks off. Look for further reports on this (and other) websites.



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PHILIP AUSTIN • PETER BERGMAN
DAVID OSSMAN • PHILIP PROCTOR
known collectively as
THE FIRESIGN THEATRE
on the occasion of the performance of,
“FORWARD! INTO THE PAST!”
Celebrating the 40th Anniversary of
“The Further Adventures of Nick Danger, Third Eye”
April 24, 2009

Golden State Theatre, Monterey, California.

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