

Twenty-Four Hours to “Twelfth Night”:
One Man’s Sleepless Quest for Shakespeare in the Park Tickets,
the Meaning of Life and Anne Hathaway
by Adam Bertocci

Eleventh Night, or, Hark! A Vagrant.

Notions of a grittier, angrier New York from a forgotten age called the 1980s swim through my mind as I plod up Central Park West. Although I was too young to have employed this information directly, I remember knowing even back then that Central Park was just one of those places you didn’t go at night; the black sky’s kiss was apt to transform the verdant paradise into a dark haven for winos, vagrants, thieves, brigands, prowlers, prostitutes, rapists and homosexuals in search of casual encounters.

But these are new times, and the great mixed bag that is gentrification has swept through such bugbears of decades past. People push strollers around the Lower East Side and the most horrifying thing you’ll face in Harlem is a guy selling terrible artwork on cheap t-shirts.

Still and yet, the prospect of braving Central Park at night still struck a chord in my privileged Caucasian bones, as if I were in for real adventure lending me legitimacy and, in a word, cred. A thrill was with me as I did my Internet research on the matter. Call it a new step in my lifelong love affair with the dark.

It is somewhere between 2:00 and 2:30 in the morning on Sunday, July 5, 2009, and I am making my first proper and serious attempt to land tickets to Shakespeare in the Park, to see Academy Award-nominee Anne Hathaway in “Twelfth Night”.

For the uninitiated, Shakespeare in the Park is the brainchild of legendary producer Joseph Papp, whose vision of free Shakespeare in (you’ll never guess) the Park has been part of the metropolitan fabric since the 1950s. The most agreeable ticket price aside, the program has proven a beloved cultural institution, attracting some of the finest casts from both Broadway and Hollywood and some of the most dedicated culture vultures you’ll ever meet.

Exact ticket-acquisition procedures have varied from year to year. At present, tickets are distributed at the Delacorte Theater itself at 1 PM on the day of the performance. At this point in “Twelfth Night”’s run, thanks to Anne Hathaway’s star power and a rave review from the “Times”, arrival any later than 8 AM is a fool’s errand, and even 7 AM is pushing it.

It is no later than 2:30 AM when I reach 81st Street.

The old familiar buildings look different at night, or maybe the whole city feels different. My erratic schedule has more than once granted me the sublime experience of feeling like the only person in Manhattan, out and about in the strange hours where one can walk the

streets with even the most iconic of brand names and find not another human in sight, nary a moving car or a sound to prove the island still populated.

Speaking of unpopulated lands, nobody is piled outside the gates of the park waiting to be let in, which implies to me, barring neutron-bomb-induced holocaust, that I am either the first arrival or that the fashion is to scoff at the park's not-terribly-enforced closing time of 1 AM. I presume the latter, and tentatively creep in as if expecting someone to leap out of Diana Ross Playground and purposefully violate my anal cavity. There's a nice young couple playing with a dog about fifty feet into the parkland; if they're there, it can't be too bad. It also means the cops aren't going round sweeping the park with flashlights and tossing out eager beavers.

This sets me up for a prime opportunity to make the most of my early arrival.

Predictably, I get lost by overcorrecting for a turn near the Marionette Theater and only reach the Delacorte at around 2:45.

There are already about ten people lined up.

I claim my spot in a nice patch under a tree, atop a pile of soft wood chippings. I am greeted by David, who will be my neighbor and friend for the next nine-and-a-quarter hours. "Are you here for Shakespeare tickets?" he asks. (Ruining my planned opening line to him: "So, what brings you here?")

The people on line ahead of us clearly wanted it more. David tells me that the first guy on line claims to have arrived at midnight. How he didn't get thrown out of the park at closing time is a mystery. The true earlycomers are not young whippersnappers, either; indeed, I am the youngest person here by several years. Most are New Yorkers. The tourists will come later.

As David blows up his industrial-strength air mattress, which he will later twin with two soft folding chairs and a portable DVD player, I lie down on the wood, rest my head on my backpack. It's about 3 AM. I yammer "Star Wars" trivia at David until he falls asleep. Through the trees, in my little shred of sky, I can see one star above. I will stare at it long enough to see it rotate.

Other people arrive over the course of the night. I nod to them, say hi. I am not sleepy, and in any case I've never been much of a napper. I have deliberately corrupted my sleep schedule to get here at this ungodly hour, understanding that my chance of getting a ticket would plummet with every minute passed after the sunrise. I stayed up really absurdly late on Friday, slept in past 1 on Saturday, and took a nap in the evening. In essence, I have done nothing of value with my weekend but tamper with my natural rhythms to get me here. I am reminded of the famous headline from "The Onion": "Dressing Up Your Dog As Boba Fett Is Something You Have To Devote A Weekend To."

At some point between 4 and 5 AM, a man in an unmarked truck drives past to open the restrooms, for which I am grateful; its not that I am inexperienced or ashamed to practice the art of tree-based urination, it's just that for some reason this seems the wrong setting. I go to christen the mens room and pass a fellow line-waiter, reciting some sort of monologue to himself. Maybe "Twelfth Night"? Who knows?

It occurs to me that there is now officially no moment on the 24-hour clock which has not found me, at one point or another in my life, out on the streets of New York. The hours move quickly. I turn on my cell phone at 5 AM just in case anyone wishes to call me, for reasons I cannot explain even to myself; perhaps I am subconsciously hoping someone will call and ask where I am at this hour. As the sky lightens, I realize that I have passed through the 'bum' phase of this adventure. Soon the park will officially open and I'll be there as a perfectly legitimate citizen. This vaguely disappoints me.

Twelfth Morning, or, America On Line.

You can't really watch the sun rise unless you can see the horizon, but this is still the first time in years I've been awake and paying attention to the sky as night slips away. It's a gradual process, and yet not: get interested in a conversation for two minutes and the world becomes different before you catch it.

At around 5:30 AM the traffic patterns shift. Peoples' arrivals are no longer just them and their friends showing up in little clumps of two and four. Actual droves prove in evidence, swarming the grass like disciples flocking to their preacher of choice; if I hadn't known better, I'd have said that some kind of bus or train had pulled up for the express purpose of dropping off hopeful patrons of the arts. The line quickly extends north. It is a twisting, curving little road, and soon I cannot see where any new additions land. I only see them arrive, storming over the fields, power-walking.

I get to know only my immediate neighbors. A "New Yorker" cartoonist combating a bout of Bell's Palsy, wearing an eye patch. A genial geek in a black hoodie, his bed head (wood-chip-pile head?) never quite remedied over the course of the day. A bespectacled, bearded, bald man with a Stentorian voice. A beautiful girl in pajama pants and an ironic t-shirt who has criminally bespoiled a perfect face with a nose piercing. I do not come to learn most of these peoples' names. We are what "Fight Club" so memorably called single-serving friends, us bold folk at the head of the line; the entire purpose of our being here this early was to ensure that we didn't have to spend another day this summer sitting in the line with each other.

I say "the line", but there are really two lines, as there's a special line for seniors and the disabled. The first senior arrives at around 6 AM.

The term 'extreme culture' runs through my mind.

I stand, review the competition. There are more waiters here than in the graduating class of the New School's acting program. Oh, the people up front have a more advantageous

area to sit in, perhaps, but I have space. The seating is not bunched up on my little tree-lined corner. This is the basic question driving New York real estate, and by association all of New York: neighborhood versus space.

And I prefer to stand in my space, incidentally. It helps me meet people. Given my high-visibility location on the corner and my general shaggily approachable demeanor (for some reason I'm always the guy people ask for directions or "do you work here?" in stores), I am eager to become what urbanist Jane Jacobs calls a public character.

After the fifth or sixth time I am asked "What time did you get here?", I fashion a sign reading "2:45" in bold Sharpie. This proves a popular conversation-starter or -stopper based on my whims. Many passersby laugh when they ask the question and I point to the sign.

And there are passersby indeed; I tell them the same stories I'm telling you now. When they ask how far the line goes down, I tell them, "Try Astoria." (My geography is addled here, I should really say something like Riverdale, but Astoria is a much funnier word. The funniest Bronx neighborhood name, incidentally, would probably have been Baychester. Throggs Neck is funnier to read than say, and to spout Spuyten Duyvil would threaten the joke's meaning in favor of the outlandish text.)

Then there's the chipper girl who comes to interview me for her video blog. We talk for about half an hour and I end up serving as videographer for one shot.

Then there's the giggling woman who asks if she can get a picture: me with my "2:45" sign and David and his wife on their air mattress watching their DVD of "Blindness" starring Julianne Moore. It is merely the most memorable of many tourist photos I am appearing in.

For the line is an impressive entity, and I encourage anyone visiting New York in the summer to check it out as part of their Central Park tour. It stretches at least a quarter of a mile, a snakelike beast buzzing with energy, dotted at every turn with little communities and strange sights to see. It's like Woodstock in one dimension. People set up tents, lay down colorful blankets, play board games. Deliverymen troll up and down the line on bicycles, calling the names of whoever ordered something. A genial chap offers to rent out tripod stools for five bucks. Tourists gawk; jaded New Yorkers jog by.

People swap stories about being in line. Lines they've previously sat in. People they've seen, times it rained. Theories about ideal arrival times and handicapping. There's a science to all this: a popular rule of thumb has it that the geographical cutoff point for tickets tends to be by the swing set, and anyone between the theater and the swing set is probably safe.

Then there's the toothless black man who tells me about how he used to go clubbing long into the night before showing up for Shakespeare tickets, back in the day.

Then there's the woman strolling through the park carrying her tiny kitten in a pouch around her neck, a little tabby, can't be any more than four months old, looking around at a world still so new to him.

Somewhere in all this I befriend a local raccoon, who chose to wait till burgeoning daylight to emerge. What mischievous trick of evolution made these little bandits so cute? I'm finding all the animals to be very socialized here, actually; a little hopping robin will come to visit me several times over the course of the wait, and sparrows surround me without fear... I've disparaged them as boring birds in the past, but up close their browns become more distinct, patterns emerging in the plumage. All told, though, the avian attention makes me feel like a Disney princess getting dressed.

The entire affair is almost briefly scuttled when a disconcerting clutch of pigeons congregates in my general area. Mercifully, they leave.

Twelfth Afternoon, or, The Mushy Middle.

At 1 PM they get us organized to hand out tickets. I give high props to the staff for keeping things largely orderly, but the studiedly random scheme of how exactly individual tickets are distributed befuddles me; you would think that first-comers would get better seats, but my assignment to Row T does not fill me with confidence.

Still, I have my ticket. Which is more than can be said for anyone that day who arrived after 5:45 AM.

I have nearly seven hours before curtain, all the time in the world. Even allowing for excursions to the restroom or the hot dog cart, I have not left a specific hundred-foot radius since 2:45 AM. I have stood in one place and watched night turn to day; watched clouds become wisps and then empty blue sky, watched the park change from a forbidding wasteland to a tourist's playground.

I haul myself in a southeasterly direction, back to the Apple Store to crow about my ticket to people in my social network. It's as good a destination as any, and I want to see something today.

Central Park is a confusing place to explain. It's the only place in Manhattan where you can lose sight of where you are, where the orderly grid of numbers and streets means nothing. Sometimes you can't even see buildings. That the city planned for such a wondrous place is pretty mind-blowing. It's all been specifically landscaped to not conform to the rest of the metropolitan landscape.

People are littered about like leaves, tanning; an oily girl in a bikini everywhere you look. Bicyclists, rollerbladers. Little street bands performing Michael Jackson covers. I've never seen most of these corners, statues, but then, I have a way of getting lost in here. I pass several people who cheer out "Ghostbusters!" in response to my fashionable logo-festooned t-shirt, and one impromptu recitation of the theme song lyrics. I get this a lot.

I emerge from the land of leafy green onto 59th Street in the height of full-on tourist scramble. It's hot. I collapse near a fountain, and sit and collect myself for a bit, staring up at the Plaza Hotel. I splash water from the fountain onto my face without any shame, being careful not to disturb the pennies that are people's wishes. I've gotten too many of mine to dishonor that.

But I ascertain too late that the heat has made me comically delirious; I find myself weeping with joy in FAO Schwarz at the sight of all the happy kids marveling at toys. This happens at least three or four times. Actually, sometimes it's not even the kids that set me off. Sometimes it's just the toys.

Upon leaving and heading for the park again, I find myself recollecting my many adventures, and what an amazing experience I had being on line, and mustn't New York be just the most special place to bring a kid on vacation, and long story short I burst into tears again. I have not slept since 8 PM the previous evening, and it is probably time for me to calm down a bit. I feel a deep connection to Holden Caulfield's memorable bawl as he watched his sister ride the carousel in the rain in... Central Park Zoo. He ended up in the mental hospital not long after, right?

I wind my way up through the park again, giving ample and careful berth to the carriage horses. My affection for horses has historically been limited, and in any case I prefer to keep my distance from any abused animal larger than a Pekinese.

A crowd is gathered at the Strawberry Fields Memorial. Presumably they're feeling something for Michael Jackson as well, letting one dead musician temporarily stand in for another; the connections are tenuous at best, but you can feel the sensation, and though I would not have thought to remember Jackson here, I "get it". As I always do when in the area, I pay my respects to Lennon, but with a minimum of fuss. Two fingers pressed to the lips, down to the stone, and I'm up and gone. I've never felt the impulse people have to leave things behind that will only be swept away. But I comprehend the need to gather; the artificiality of everyday life compels us to go to specific places to feel again.

I am back at the Delacorte around 4 PM. This begins the unpleasant portion of proceedings, as I am at this point very tired. I never quite find an enjoyable rock to sit on, and I feel myself threatening to doze off whilst attempting to read. My pretensions have extended toward packing books about acting and the theater (I try to avoid spelling it British-style). They were heavy and I can't even focus on them.

I am hoping for a 'class reunion' atmosphere of sorts with the people in my cluster of the line, but it never quite comes. Some don't even seem to recognize me, as if it were thousands of years ago. Even David and I only exchange about fifty words. Maybe all our bonds were meant to break when tickets were handed out; in an era when everyone has to be each other's friend on Facebook, exchange business cards and store numbers in their

cell phones within fourteen minutes of contact, maybe it's important to know people just once and let them slip away.

I change my shirt into something nicer and less likely to provoke people into chirping the biggest hit from Ray Parker, Jr. I take off my shoes and socks, which is like heaven. My two notes for if I ever do this again: bring a chair with a back, and fresh socks.

Aside from a brief interlude wherein I help a senior citizen over a fence, this is an uneventful period, and I really, really struggle to stay awake. I will not have slept for twenty-four hours by the time the proverbial curtain rises.

Twelfth Night, or, What You Will.

I confess to being unimpressed with Row T, Seat 403. I am one of the first twenty arrivals and have been rewarded with one of the worst twenty seats. I look around the nosebleed section and find many other people in terrible seats representing the just-past-midnight crew; my eye-patched cartoonist line companion is particularly irate. Luck of the draw, people. Luck of the draw.

Next to me sits an older gentleman with someone I presume to be his niece, explaining the plot. I've never seen "Twelfth Night" (Amanda Bynes in "She's the Man", enjoyable though it was, does not quite count) and have only read it once, but the program is most helpful in getting me prepared. The program also includes a lengthy summary of the rationale for picking "Twelfth Night" and some photos from past productions; this has evidently been a popular show to bring to the Park lately, and the whole thing lends the occasion a sense of history. The cross-dressing alone ensures that I have picked a good show to see live; my recent viewing of Kenneth Branagh's ill-fated film of "As You Like It" reinforced my longstanding belief that you cannot place a 35mm camera in front of one of Hollywood's most luminous ladies, stick her in a vest and jaunty cap and expect to honor the illusion of a convincing boy disguise.

This document is a travelogue, a stream-of-consciousness journal and not a piece of arts criticism, so discussion of the play itself will be kept to a minimum. It worked: it started slowly, yes, and laid on the clowns a little thick, but the folk-pop score was enchanting and the comic energy built to a wonderful ending. There can't have possibly been an unsmiling face during the final dance.

So what if I hadn't slept in twenty-seven hours and my eyes looked like I'd spent the entire time smoking up; I felt alive, enthralled. And I'd shared this whole day with eighteen hundred other people.

Call it a brief repudiation of "Bowling Alone". This was the epicenter of communal experiences, of people coming together to see and do and be, eighteen hundred people together.

Thirteenth Morning, or, The Next Stage.

Having waited at stage doors many a time, I am pleasantly surprised at the Public Theaters way of doing things. They organized us by hand, not rope, into one line and got involved in making sure the actors signed for everyone who wanted it. I deem this appropriate to Joseph Papp's vision of a theater for the people. Everyone is not only signing, but having conversations; some of the cast are so friendly that one thinks they might be fishing for a dinner invite.

As befits the trend of uniting top-flight theatrical talent with the luminaries of Hollywood, the two big names I'm excited to meet are Audra McDonald (Olivia) and, no surprises here, Anne Hathaway (Viola). McDonald emerges first. The four-time Tony-winner not yet at her fortieth birthday just looks like a cool, casual college student in t-shirt and jeans; she is the first person I have ever seen who looks younger offstage than on. I wish I had a better story to tell her than, oh, hey, I saw HBO's "Wit" a few months ago. The family to my right, it turns out, contains one of her old college professors, and so there is an amusing reaction to be had.

But really, I'm in line for Anne Hathaway. I've been in line for Anne Hathaway since 2:45 AM.

Every right-thinking man is entitled to a celebrity crush, and Anne Hathaway has been my Hollywood dream girl for many years now, supplanting Jennifer Aniston who was not only getting too thin but turning into an unpleasant person. Friends will attest that I am a sucker for innocent-looking brunettes; Hathaway, all big brown eyes and effervescent smile, is so much an expression of my type that it verges on parody.

My heart skips a beat when I catch a glimpse of her around the bend. It is strange to see her as a real person. I don't mean real in the everyday-person sense but in the sense of her material presence as a physical creation. As if the concept of Anne Hathaway only existed in fiction and in other people's photographs, and she decongealed into an intelligent energy when not required for a picture. I think I would have been just as surprised had they simply wheeled out a life-sized mannequin of her with the aid of a little red wagon.

She comes closer. It doesn't occur to me to consider the irony that I am beginning and ending this adventure on a line. The family to my left has young daughters, no older than ten, who I assume know her best from "The Princess Diaries" and its regrettable sequel. (Or maybe they're huge fans of her sex scenes in "Havoc", what do I know.) I am sure they will never forget this memory.

I tense up when she reaches me. Her beauty turns my mouth dry. Thank God I've rehearsed my lines.

"Welcome to the very, very, very small list of people I'll get up at 2:45 for," I say, hearing my voice stumble and waver as she signs my program. "Get to Central Park at 2:45, I mean."

(She knows what I mean.) I barely hear her. My head is swimming.

“Is it all right if this gentleman takes a picture?” I ask, indicating a guy in the family on my right who I’ve enlisted as my photographer. Upon a reply in the affirmative, I hand over the camera, put my arm around her. The arm in question is numb; I can’t feel anything under it, and I suspect that you could have chopped off my left hand without me noticing.

The weird thing is, I generally don’t ask for pictures with celebrities I have no personal connection to. Autographs, sure, but never pictures, perhaps in part because I do not like posing for pictures (the process or the result). But this shot, I knew I’d be kicking myself if I didn’t get it.

Two pictures are taken. She, I am told, looks radiant. I have blinked as usual. This won’t be the first time I Photoshop new eyes into one of my disastrous pics. That’s okay; I’m here for the memory, not the journalism.

But I have one card yet to play. I have been working this joke over with a fine-toothed comb for days now, trying every single variant, and I think I’ve nailed it.

“So, when the production is over,” I ask, “do you get the second-best bed?”

It takes her a second.

Okay, maybe it’s just an Oscar-nominated actress faking amusement. But you could see her puzzling through the joke briefly before reacting. On the basis of watching the wheels turn in her head, I’m confident that I have actually made her laugh.

With Shakespeare nerd humor.

Referencing a coincidence that every Shakespeare nerd she’s ever met has already brought up, not to mention the occasional journalist.

Just after seeing her do... Shakespeare.

I deserve some sort of medal for this.

“Yeah, it’s weird,” she says. “Like, I’ve been discovering all these... like, did you know she was twenty-six when they got married, and I’m twenty-six now, so... that’s really interesting to me, but, I’m a dork, so.”

This is the part of the conversation I remember best; I am having difficulty recalling so much of this encounter. I remember the actions but not the sensation, as if I wasn’t actually there, like I only saw it in a movie. Even two minutes after she’s moved on down the line it has become hazy for me. It’s as if it wasn’t meant for me to hold onto.

The city looks positively magical when I re-emerge onto Central Park West. Even the winos and vagrants seem as if they've been touched by fairy dust. My head swims with more funny things I could have said to my Hollywood dream had the conversation lasted longer. But there is efficiency to contend with.

Perhaps the sociologists are right, perhaps we have lost our way with the shared experience. If this is the disease plaguing a soul-purged America, then I have found the cure. I conquered new ground in the city, sat at the fountainhead of a mass gathering, plunged myself among thousands of people, and yet in the end it all came down to one meeting with one girl I know only through a screen.

Then it ended as it began, with me alone on Central Park West, savoring the stillness of the night. Glenn Frey's lonely saxophone echoes in my mind, though I know I do not belong to the city. Not really. Though I like to think there's still a scrap of my heart someplace, left behind forever, hidden in a little pile of wood chips off West 81st Street.

It's someone else's turn to sit there now. I hope it means to them what it means to me.