

Excerpted from Down by Our Vineyard

By Kenneth Lifshitz
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Chapter 2

Of Mice and Men (a history of movies)

“I am in a bad humor tonight. There is a hard tropical downpour which has driven all the guests onto the back verandah and me into my room to escape them. They are predominantly pro-Nazi Germans, coarse, loud, overwhelmingly arrogant, descended on the hotel in a swarm the last few days. I tried to speak to one of the girls yesterday and she said, “Excuse me, I don’t speak Yiddish.” Apparently she thought I was Jewish or else regarded all Americans as Jews – anyway the remark struck me as incredibly revolting in its racial nastiness and smugness. ... Hitler has ruined the Germans, he has so thoroughly sold them on his lowest of bourgeois ideology. ... Gentle ideals were impotent enough before – what will become of them now? What will become of us? What will become of our passion for truth in this great Battle of Lies? ... The rain makes a loud, continual noise and the lightening glares balefully through my screen door. I think I will take off my clothes and go for a walk among the elements. Maybe God will be in a conversational humor tonight – for a change – and explain some things to me which I find most confusing.” A letter of Tennessee Williams to Joseph Hazan dated September 24-25, 1940.

‘Can magic still, at times, be the order of our existence?’ Tennessee Williams, paraphrase of John Sebastian or vice versa

The love-hate relationship of Sergeii Eisenstein and Walt Disney had always been fraught with all the trapping of discomfort and angst, a failed love affair, minus the sex. After Eisenstein and Paramount Studios parted ways, Eisenstein traveled south to Mexico, the refuge of jilted lovers, where he intended to begin work on the dormant ‘Navigator’ project which he had postponed while visiting Disney in Hollywood. Walt, in the meantime had been told by Paramount that the fact that his cartoon characters’ lack of a definable sexuality was resulting in loss of audiences in the Spanish speaking Americas, hurting their distribution numbers in Latin America. He had first tried to address this problem by having Donald occasionally quack out ‘Who’s your daddy-’ but with the introduction of the nephews Huey, Dewey and Louis who lacked discernible paternity, this became increasingly ambiguous and uncomfortable. Disney, being somewhat vain, had also never fully realized that the actual object of the impish Russian’s affection had been all along actually his creation and alter ego, Mickey and not him.

Seeking to kill two slightly confused birds with one stone he called Eisenstein in Mexico and told him that if he would make a cartoon based on Mexican bullfighting that embodied ‘machismo’, that perhaps Disney could sell this to Paramount and this would serve to fund his other project, “The Navigator”. Eisenstein realizing that “Navigator” had already almost consumed all his discretionary funds with which he had left Russia and, finding himself without resources he reluctantly again turned to Disney for assistance. Disney initially did not reply not wishing to offend the mercurial Russian, but also not inclined to act against his better business instincts but finally he agreed to lend Eisenstein several of his best cartoonists and enough film to shoot a short film study for the cartoon. This offer of assistance, as it turned out included, Bill Tytla, Fred Moore and Art Babbit, the best illustrators in the Disney studio at the time. While this act of generosity meant that Disney had to essentially shut down his Hollywood operations, it also was a shrewd preemptive ploy to take them out of circulation as Paramount had already hired some of his best animators out from under him just the week before and another raid was in the ‘offing’.

Shortly after they arrived, Eisenstein gathered the animators together for a meeting, this meeting taking place in Mexican town of Puerto Vallarta in 1929. He essentially said he was a film director, not a cartoon director and if they wanted to work for him they would have to draw figures not from their imagination but from his film studies made expressly for the cartoon. It was an innovative method but Eisenstein had his reasons. Eisenstein had intuitively realized that it was the failure to use live models that had resulted in the predominantly asexual character of the previous characters championed by Disney. That the characters, if drawn from real life studies would be more likely to retain their sexuality to some degree. Also, not being a fool he used the film to shoot footage of bullfights allowing the cartoonists to work directly from these, but then also recycling this same footage into his 'Navigator' production. Disney, as it turned out was not the only one good at two uncomfortable birds being stoned.

Rather than using the canisters of film Disney provided, intended not to help create studies for the cartoon but to actually film the finished cels, he merely mailed the finished cels back to the studio for filming leaving himself with all that extra footage with which to pursue his Navigator project.

The cartoonists understood the concept of thrifty self promotion that was motivating Eisenstein and indeed it was a central credo of cartoonists everywhere. Though they knew full well that Eisenstein was pursuing the Navigator project sub rosa, they found him so exceptionally sympathetic as to never convey this fact back to Disney or to the studio. When it came to flushing out the bullfight scenes with secondary characters, they decided to depict themselves as the matadors, creating a head matador in the likeness of Uncle Walt, a rather crafty display of solidarity with both men. Yet, they had protected Eisenstein by not letting on to Disney what the original raw film had actually been used for. Once he had the animation done, he had sufficient leverage to demand that Disney convert the stills to film at the studio with their resources without a word of explanation about the missing film but with a cryptic pronouncement that henceforth the project was to be called 'FreudInHand.' The result of all this maneuvering was a short cartoon entitled "Ferdinand the Mexican Bull".

The initial packages of stills that Disney received that fall had shown Ferdinand browsing lazily in the daffodil fields and the townspeople apparently prodding him to participate in some activity for which he had little or no inclination or motivation. Disney had in September received six minutes of material, all told, enough to sell the project to a studio. Based on this he went back to the Paramount execs to try and get Eisenstein additional funding for expanding this 'FreudInHand' project, since changed to 'Que Viva Mexico' to avoid confusion stemming from the Freud-In-Hand-Ferdinand phoneme. They again turned him down and also declined to distribute the Ferdinand cartoon, claiming it would be too 'disturbingly real' for children to view a bullfight, but Disney liked the cartoon enough to advertise its upcoming release under his own studio label for a winter holiday release.

Two months later, after he finally received the final set of panels from Eisenstein he realized that he had a problem on his hands besides having to push back the release date. Rather than Ferdinand being reluctant to go into the Bull Ring as Disney had supposed the story to end, it showed the actual activity Ferdinand was reluctant to engage in was more related to mounting cows and it was to this end he was being constantly prodded to by the good humored townsfolk. The final scene shows Ferdinand, happily mounting another bull in a montage shot over another bull being slaughtered in the ring. Clearly this ending would not have solved Disney's machismo problem with Paramount, and indeed it seemed to him he had been purposely sabotaged by Eisenstein causing him to fly into a rage, vowing

never to work with ‘that queer commie dwarf’ as he put it, again. Disney was able to salvage most of the film and finally released it some nine years later, in 1938 with the less controversial ending of Ferdinand’s endearing reluctance stemming from an undefined natural passivity instead of a homosexual inclination as Eisenstein had portrayed it.

In 1938, a young Philippine immigrant named Frank Bartolay saw the newly released cartoon and not understanding the perky dialog entirely, reacted strongly to the homoerotic subtext which Disney’s editing had failed to fully excise. Frank had originally traveled to the United States to study in a military school in St. Louis, with the hopes of returning to the Philippines to raise a volunteer regiment of infantry to keep the increasingly militaristic Japanese from overrunning his homeland. After seeing ‘Ferdinand the Bull’ at the Majestic theatre in St. Louis, he realized that he was himself a closeted homosexual and this precipitated in him a schizophrenic break. His exhortatory writings for the American-Philippino newspaper thereafter, attempting to gather recruits for the cause, became at first shrill and then degenerated into childish semantics and doggerel rhymes which were easily produced in the already lilting Philippine dialect. The entries in his diary show a parallel pattern of regression in mental capacity eventually to that of a functional twelve year old. The language barrier masked some of this until it was too late but there wasn’t much to be done anyway. The last entry in his diary was a picture in crayon of Ferdinand the Bull eating daisies in a field. By early 1939, his professors at the school realizing that his condition was beyond what they were equipped to handle, attempted to have him shipped back to the Philippines, but his parents refused to buy him a ticket. He was expelled from the military academy and there his story seems to dead end.

Frank Bartolay’s suitcase was one of those discovered in the attic of Willard Insane Asylum in 1995 along with cache of some four hundred others that had been left there for storage when the owners entered the asylum. It included his diary and his military school uniform and clippings from the Philipino American newspapers that had published his limerick calls to arms. The contents of his suitcase were among twelve that were chosen in 2004 to be displayed at the New York State museum in an exhibit entitled ‘Lost Cases, Recovered Lives’. His drawing of Ferdinand the Bull eating daisies gazes up placidly at the passersby from its position in the corner display case in the New York State Museum in Albany.

Meanwhile, after shipping the final panels, Eisenstein realized that he might have to find yet another source of funding rather quickly, so he turned to Charlie Chaplin. Chaplin, already under some suspicion himself for his leftist political leanings, declined to help directly but instead put him in touch with another Utopian Socialist, Upton Sinclair who had found by then that his muckraking activities had left him embarrassingly well to do. Sinclair was well known in Russia and thus in fact initially more palatable to Eisenstein as a potential partner even than Disney and he and Sinclair soon formed a production company with Sinclair sending Eisenstein a check for \$25,000 so he could continue to work on his film, now retitled, ‘Que Viva Mexico’.

Within a few weeks after receiving the initial check, Eisenstein requested an additional \$25,000 but Sinclair withheld further funding pending his seeing the rushes which Eisenstein resented as interference from an amateur. To compound matters, Sinclair then threatened briefly to come down to Mexico to see how his investment was being spent, ostensibly to bring other investors into the picture, but really to spy on Eisenstein. Eisenstein still had the bull fighting footage he had shot on Disney’s dime and this became the foundational scene of the new work as a segment called ‘Fiesta’ but he did not have anything coherent really to show a producer and his mistrust of Sinclair was growing.

He once again found that he was quickly running short both of political and financial capital so he packed up the footage he had shot in a steamer trunk which he shipped back to Sinclair in Los Angeles. Just before closing the trunk he threw in a pile of homoerotic sketches done by 'a local Mexican artist' Pablo, on top of the film cans, remarking, 'see how the old tightass Quaker likes that' and then he returned to Moscow, from which his absence had already rendered him an object of some suspicion in Stalin's circles .

Of course when Sinclair opened the trunk seeing the sketches on top he was flabbergasted and refused even to look at the film footage that Eisenstein had shot that lay underneath, and which was among his most brilliant work visually, even if it was still uncut and without a score. Sinclair had the entire trunk shipped back to Russia where it was held in secret by Eisenstein's assistant Gregory Alexandrov in his apartment until after Eisenstein's death a few years after WWII, having labeled it as pickled watermelon, a working class delicacy, which Alexandrov knew, Eisenstein as well as both Stalin and his wife Orlova disliked intensely rendering it less likely to be opened.

Five years after Eisenstein's death, in October of 1953, President Dwight Eisenhower visited Nuevo Guerrero Mexico to dedicate the new Falcon Dam project which had created a recreational area along the Mexican border called Falcon State Park and which included a new sixty mile lake formed by damming the Rio Grande River. About month later, in early December he met with Winston Churchill and French President Joseph Laniel in Bermuda, his first post-war meeting with his greatest wartime ally and friend, and the French President and the only presidential summit to take place entirely in Bermuda shorts causing them to break precedent and call it, instead of a 'summit', a 'conference'. Gregory Alexandrov, the filmmaker, happened also to be in Bermuda vacationing at the time following the successful release of his film "Glinka, Man of Music", having by that time become a person of some modest international prominence in the film industry and having finally emerged from his mentor's long shadow. Staying at the same hotel, he requested and was granted an audience with Eisenhower who was by coincidence, also a fan of Glinka's, this despite the fact that Glinka's music had recently been adopted as the new Soviet National anthem. Aside from that, Eisenhower was glad to talk to Alexandrov because he was eager for any news about the new leader Malenkov who had succeeded Stalin a little earlier in the year and who was a relatively unknown quantity.

Eisenhower, at this meeting recounted with zest his recent visit to Mexico which incited Alexandrov to likewise reminisce about his experiences there with Eisenstein back in the '1920s' and the whole Upton Sinclair, FreudInHand-Ferdinand-Que Viva Mexico' fiasco during which he had been Eisenstein's assistant. He also happened to remark that he had the original rushes of 'Que Viva Mexico', the final title of the film, still in his apartment. Richard Nixon, who was then vice president, overhearing this conversation, later approached Alexandrov, cornering him near the Cuban cigar store in the lobby and with his characteristic intimidating head shake remonstrating, 'Look buddy, I don't know what coconut tree you pissing up here, but if there is a deal to be made, I'm the one to do it with, not DeeDee.', DeeDee being Nixon's pet moniker for General Eisenhower. In fact, Alexandrov had had an ulterior motive in approaching Eisenhower. He wanted to make another movie in Mexico, a musical this time, but could thus far not get a visa. In his mind, due mostly to Stalin's characterization, Mexico was like the 51st state and he had assumed that Eisenhower could arrange it for him with little difficulty.

Alexandrov wanted desperately to make a movie about a singing Mexican Mouse featuring Eli Wallach as the voice of the mouse. Nixon, continued the conversation but was clearly nervous, looking over

his shoulder frequently, anticipating the Churchill might at any minute make his daily cigar run to the lobby, and not wanting to be seen to be involved directly with this whole thing gave Alexandrov one last parting look and said 'take it or leave it' and exited through the front of hotel, tripping and dislodging the coconut matting there. Seeing that Alexandrov had not followed him, he circle around to open glass less window in the lobby and understanding there was some political hay to be made here, whispered to Alexandrov conspiratorially through the palm fronds edging the window casement, 'lookit, you donate that film footage of Eisenstein's to the Museum of Modern Art and I will make sure you get a U.S. and a Mexican visa, pronto or however the hell you say 'real fast' in Russian.'" Alexandrov agreed with the added caveat that he would be the one to add the soundtrack and cut the film into something that could be displayed at the Museum's modern film series.

When the film finally was run at a MOMA retrospective of Eisenstein, a co-production credit was given to Alexandrov who had, in addition to adding sound, added a somewhat pedantic and entirely unnecessary postlude in which he personally explains the whole checkered history of the Freud-Lissitzky Navigator and his personal involvement with it dating from the trip to Vienna with Eisenstein and the meeting with Freud.

It was shortly after this improbable conversation that Laniel conveyed to Eisenhower that Charles DeGaulle had confided in him, that he was considering coming out of retirement to lead his country 'back to greatness' and that he planned to galvanize popular anger around a recent project he had heard of called 'EuroDisney'. Laniel, who was nursing a twisted ankle that he had gotten by slipping on the fresh coconut matting put out for him especially at the entrance to the Crystal Caves tourist attraction, said to Eisenhower at the time, not wanting to disparage the wartime leader, 'it is not so much that .. (DeGaulle) is offended by the crude cultural imperialism of the United States, but by the fact that its spokesman is a sexless Mouse wearing a square jockstrap with rivets.' Overhearing this conversation Churchill decided it would be funny to then parade a goat in a jockstrap with two large buttons around the Government House, where the talks were being held, which, along with his cigar lent a pungent odor to the entire remainder of the proceedings. This irritated Laniel, but more precisely, his nasal passages, as he was by then also suffering from a bad cold. After these developments with the goat, Laniel decided to retire to his room for the balance of the conference and allowed his deputy to conduct all further discussions thenceforward on his behalf. It is however not clear if this was entirely voluntary or his deputy, George Bidault, had in fact arranged this all to keep him from further embarrassing DeGaulle.

As for DeGaulle's plan, this was the last thing that either Churchill, Laniel or Eisenhower wanted to have to deal with, some grand plan for a Fifth Republic at the center of a resurrected Europe, a dream that in the face of the powerful Soviet monolith was becoming more mere bombast and less and less realistic. Eisenhower thus wanted at all costs to prevent DeGaulle from succeeding in another bid for power. Aside from the political implications, he personally had had enough of DeGaulle's baseless imperiousness during the war. He also knew that that French public opinion could be galvanized only around what they considered to be bad taste as an object of derision. Eisenhower also realized that to sustain respect for American Military power, that mere might had to be supplemented by the infiltration of cultural values of equal stature and conviction.

So, he presented all this in a quiet tete-a-tete, once the goat had been put away, to his wartime partner, Churchill, putting the matter in these stark terms; if he was to avoid a poisonous Gaullist inspired reaction to the extended presence of American troops on the European mainland, which he in fact

regarded as a foregone necessity in light of the Soviet Union's aggressive posture, the U.S. would have to provide a better, more authentic cultural ambassador than Mickey Mouse in a beret. This was a concept that Churchill, a man intimately familiar with the mechanics of neo-imperialism readily agreed to.

Eisenhower realized somewhat shrewdly, that subconsciously, the face of American cartoon characters might bring back associations with of American bombers who during the war had emblazoned on their noses images of "Thumper", "Friend Owl" and "Flower" characters from Bambi, and other Disney animated characters. This had been employed mostly because they were easier to draw than semi-nude women in most cases but being themselves essentially unclothed could be somewhat easily converted into female semi-nudes should a competent artist later appear to accomplish this. (This would come to be known as 'nose-art' not to be confused with the later practice of artistic nose jewelry). Eisenhower in short did not want Disney to become by default the self appointed face of American culture in Europe when the French clearly preferred the quirky and disturbed Jerry Lewis. As fate would have it, Jerry Lewis was just then appearing along with Dean Martin at the Copacabana in Manhattan and hence was not available

It was at that point that Nixon had sensed more than seen the opportunity to manipulate the adventitious appearance of Grigory Alexandrov at the conference to his advantage. With all the craft and personal charm he could muster without cursing, Nixon outlined to Eisenhower a dual pointed post-Marshall Cultural Plan. It would be the Soviets through Alexandrov that would be represented by a dancing singing Mouse, not the U.S. It was classic counter-cartoon cold war strategy. The U.S. instead could supply a series of serious cultural initiatives based on its 'real' culture, 'realkultur', not the 'ersatz', 'shmaltzy' Hollywood version the style that Alexandrov had adopted so seamlessly to 'realpolitik' and that Disney had pioneered. Eisenhower, skeptical at first, finally saw the logic of what Nixon was proposing, asking, "yes, but who, can we get to represent our true values -- who is popular yet still quirky enough to be liked by the French?" Adding, "Obviously, we certainly don't want those California hipsters representing us." referring to the new 'beak' movement that was arising. As it turned out, Tennessee Williams had just won the Film Critics Award for the screenplay of 'Streetcar'. Having just read that in that morning's Herald Tribune Nixon seized on this fact.

It was the old ploy of 'bread and circuses' but the French already had good bread, what they really needed was, a circus and no one, as it turned out, could provide a circus better than Nixon. Eisenhower had supported the initial tentative steps in this direction, the programs to soften the perception of American on Europe. This had been the *raison d'être* of what was called 'sister cities' program, an initiative in which Nixon had had a huge hand, but bizarrely, Paris, the refined and elegant French Capital had been paired with the muscular, beefy Chicago. Chicago was a city Parisians knew mostly through the novels of Upton Sinclair whose depiction of its stockyards in the novel "The Jungle" single-handedly caused them to disdain 'Le Hambugeuer Boef' in favor of horsemeat. This abortive attempt at deflecting the imminent charges of Philistinism, in short, had not gone down well with Parisians to that point who had already been offended by the expatriate e.e. cummings lack of capitalization. DeGaulle's xenophobic bid might just have succeeded if not for Nixon's quick thinking.

Realizing that his reply would be critical, Nixon seized on an answer he knew was likely to please Eisenhower, "Tennessee Williams,--a son of the South. He would be our cultural ambassador! Who better than Lanier's namesake?" he pronounced turning to wave at the French President who was seated nearby and who responded by sneezing. "It's Laniell!", Eisenhower corrected him, "rhymes with

Spaniel, not Lanier,- rhymes with queer.” The fact that Williams whose middle name was Lanier and who was gay and had moved to St. Louis when he was eight did not deter Nixon, who assumed that anyone born in the South, particularly in Mississippi could not be ‘really’ gay, a preconception that Truman Capote would later finally disabuse him of.¹ Nixon was well aware that Tennessee Williams was already in Mexico supposedly working on a play project. Indeed J. Edgar Hoover had recently just apprised him of this fact in anticipation of a request to keep an eye on any artists traveling abroad. Nixon had issued this request in anticipation of his own role in the McCarthy hearings to follow just a few months after Hoover had supplied the information. Hoover replied with a caution, noting that Williams appeared to be a friend of Eli Wallach’s who was blacklisted. In fact Wallach’s breakthrough role, *Mangiavallo*, in Williams’ “The Rose Tattoo” was the one for which he received ‘featured actor’ Tony Award the previous year, but eventually Hoover cleared Tennessee of all suspicion when he found out that the author had been shipped by mistake a parcel intended for Hoover from Frederick’s of Hollywood and that he had done the tactful gentlemanly thing forwarded to Hoover unopened with a note that read ‘Evidence’. So it was agreed.

The matter presumably settled, Nixon went about stage managing this in such a skilled and deft manner that it would come to amaze those who would become acquainted with his ham handed-antics later when he became president himself. With ultimate gamesmanship he had his buddy John Huston contact Tennessee, who then agreed to meet the famed director in Puerto Vallarta and to provide him a script for a new movie, to be based on the play he was then working on there. Nixon, if nothing else, was shrewd. He knew he needed Williams not just to write the play, but to himself participate in the movie version, to lend it credibility and authenticity in line with Eisenhower’s ‘realkultur’ initiative. Also, he wanted Alexandrov somewhere where he could keep an eye on him, to make sure he followed through with promise to shoot the ‘El Mouse’ Movie so he also arranged for the entire Falcon Dam construction crew, now idled but not yet dispersed, all be transported to Puerto Vallarta to build the sets, ostensibly for the John Huston/Williams film. At a stroke he insured that a set would be made available at no cost during the daytime to Alexandrov for his musical which came to be titled, “Topo Gigio, the Mexican Mouse’ and guaranteeing that both movies would be made at the same location at the same time so he could easily keep track of both Williams and Alexandrov.

Puerto Vallarta, even by 1954 was anything but a well known, well appointed resort destination. It consisted of two run down streets, and a beach called Los Muertos or ‘The Dead’, so called not because of anyone that had been killed there, but because the coral reef composed primarily of red coral which, when disintegrating, imparted a red tinge to the sand, but it also aptly described the social life there. As luck would have it, Alexandrov was very well acquainted with Puerto Vallarta, it having been the original backdrop for Eisenstein’s abortive Navigator project. The 1929 footage for ‘The Freud Lissitzky Navigator’ or ‘Freud-In-Hand’ or ‘Que Viva Mexico’ as it finally came to be known had all been filmed nearby. The major structure in the town was the hotel which dominated the bay, sporting a new real blood red tiled roof where all the other buildings along the street were topped with dried coconut fronds over a latticework frame. The red beach, the red tile, the bull’s blood had all come to form a central motif in Eisenstein’s earlier work. Unfortunately the movie had been in black and white.

Two local Mexican entrepreneurs called the Fierro Brothers had actually started a regular air service

1 Though Truman was born in New Orleans, Hoover had also uncharacteristically personally vouched for him.

serving Puerto Vallarta from Gaudalajara in 1934. The Fierro brothers had proceeded to build a runway on the only baseball field in Jalisco province, the one next to the hotel, the Posada de la Selva (Jungle Inn) smack in the middle of Puerto Vallarta. When the kids who used it to play ball tried to protest, at first they were run off by the employees of the Fierro's who yelled after them that their mothers were whores. When the construction workers arrived with the bulldozers, they claimed that they were building a hospital there that would help the children and their families. They erected a Swiss flag on the site claiming that it was where the Red Cross would be stationed. They flattened and paved the area and then left taking the flag with them. This strip came to extend from bend in the river approximately to the beginning of Los Muertos beach.

Like the Wright brothers, the inaugural flight of the Fierro brothers venture went off without a hitch; the second flight unfortunately crashed into the ocean, killing one passenger. Apparently on the second try the pilot overshot the runway and ended up in the bay after encountering a strong offshore breeze that blew in from the Sierra Occidental foothills at an inopportune moment. Eyewitnesses to the event claimed they could have saved the passenger, but were more interested in saving the mailbag since they had obtained a government contract to deliver the mail in Jalisco so, --they let the passenger drown, not wanting to lose the mail delivery contract.

So, in December of 1953 Williams had agreed to the Huston project and booked a flight to Puerto Vallarta, ostensibly to soak up the local atmosphere and to begin work on the play. He booked at flight in on the Fierro brothers' service. As his plane approached the runway he remarked somewhat loudly and nervously, waving his hand at the pilot remarked loudly that the bay appeared to him to resemble the tip of a penis and he promptly named it 'Bay of Fags' (Bahia Maricon). The pilot, finding eventually that his passenger was a well known gringo writer, liked to repeat the story thinking that it had some special literary merit, and he especially enjoyed yelling out the tagline, waving his hand grandly, 'Este es el 'Bay of Fags'!. This was local color that added to the experience as later tourists began flocking to the area, similar to the Hemingway lore that grew up around the affluent circumhydrated hippy mall called Key West so, it was not only tolerated but encouraged. Thus, for a short while, the Bay was actually known as Bahia Maricon but this was eventually to Bahia Banderas or Bay of Flags. This was so that the pilot could continue recounting the original story with same gusto but avoiding the quizzical looks that the previously yelled tagline had engendered, at least for the benefit of the English speaking passengers.

The small planes of the Fierro company had soon learned to alter their approach path to mitigate the downdraft factor but this caused them to have to fly very close to the main Church steeple and when descending, it even appeared from the ground as though they would crash into the bell tower before landing by the river. In fact, for the first several years, the spectators on the ground awaiting the plane's arrival, would generally cover their eyes as the plane made its final approach not wanting to witness the destruction of the church, crossing themselves and uttering 'Dios Mio', trying to ward off the impossibly bad luck that would accrue should this in fact occur. This, as one might have guessed, did not especially serve to inspire confidence in the passengers as they made the approach looking out the cabin window seeing all the townspeople lined up with their hands over their eyes, crossing themselves. Even after decades had passed without incident it appeared that the townspeople continued this practice, finding it now a source of amusement and income, since the hotel finding that it had a positive impact on its bar business when the planed landed had taken steps to insure it continued.

The hotel with its distinctive red tile roof was generally the first thing you saw when approaching from the air. It is understandable that when he arrived, Tennessee would have been slightly shaken (and stirred). The first thing that he did on descending from the plane was to ask the way to the hotel bar. He approached a man who was standing by the river and drawled with a casualness that belied his frayed nerves, where is the Taxi? "Donde es el Taxi." The man responded in Spanish, that he was ashamed to say that he did not know and that he would go out and buy one immediately. This turned out not to be a great inconvenience as one would have suspected. The hotel consisted in a two story affair and as it turned out, was not at all far from the end of the runway. The pilot politely offered to taxi Tennessee over there, which offer was promptly accepted.

The man he had first questioned it turns out, was suffering from senile dementia and this reply was in fact his own personal passion play of senility, essentially recreating what had actually occurred some two decades earlier when in fact this same man, Carlos, did run out and buy a taxi the same day the air service was established. Carlos had run the taxi service in the town up until 1941 when he sold the business to his nephew for a tidy profit. The 'business', in 1941, still consisted of the original 1934 Plymouth convertible and the right to ferry the growing tourist population around the bay. In 1953, the nephew was still driving the Plymouth, but that week that Tennessee arrived he was laid up with a case of phlebitis awaiting the delivery of a new Plymouth, a maroon Plaza Suburban which had been held up because the maroon color had been discontinued..

Tennessee then, apparently unable to write, began a month long bender which consisted of his drinking warm Tequila for hours on end in the hotel bar and then going up to his room to change into an identical rumpled pin striped linen suit, resting for a few hours and then resuming his position at the bar laying his Panama hat on the stool beside him occasionally making bitchy comments to the same senile ex-taxi driver who was usually seated nearby. One afternoon, he received a letter from the United States that was apparently from the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He left it unopened for several hours on the bar, using it as a coaster causing the ink to run and the envelope actually to resemble modern art, but finally curiosity overcame him. What it contained was a clipping of his Film Critics Award for his screenplay for 'Streetcar' along with a personal note from John Huston saying, 'are you ready for number two?'. After that disturbing event, he occasionally would bring down with him a white lined legal pad with him on which he would begin to scribble, but it was never more than a few words and then he would lay down the pencil in disgust uttering one word loudly; 'C---sucker' at which the bartender would bring him a drink. The bartender, not understanding English thought that 'C---sucker' was the English word for Tequila. Tennessee did nothing to disabuse him of this. The ex-taxi driver would only nod gravely and sympathetically repeat, 'C---sucker'.

One evening in late January, a muscular man sporting a masculine, smart derby with a little silk flower and a suit that advertised by the way that not only was he unimpressed by the fact that he was in Mexico, let alone in a sleazy bar, but that he had found a fantastic local dry cleaner and florist, sidled up to Ten and said, do you mind if I sit here. Tennessee drawled back, I don't mind ay'tawl, that is, if you don't mind having a Panama Hat shoved up your ass. The man extended his hand and said "John Huston, Mr. Williams,--" Tennessee with an air of mock surprise, by then knowing who the man was replied, "No,-I thought you were Ernest Hemingway!" removing the hat from the stool. "I believe you may have a script for me?" Huston inquired not put off at all. "Well the truth of the matter is, I do not have a screenplay yet,--however, I do have a play which you are welcome to shoot as a film if you should wish to do so,-- the only thing I am lacking at present is a name for the damn thing. I had intended to call it 'Trip the Wild Fandango' but that seemed a bit effeminate and gawwdy to me. What

do you think?” Huston did not even hesitate replying, “You know I have worked with a lot of writers and most of them were assholes, or c---suckers.” At this the bartender brought Huston a drink and Tennessee placing his hat on the opposite stool replied without missing a beat to Huston ‘I understand your sentiments completely and indeed I was one myself until quite recently when circumstances rendered it impossible.’ At that Huston let out a laugh and downed the Tequila in a gulp. “If you had let me finish, I was going to say, but in this case, it is such an honor to work with someone of your talents, that if you will just act as a consultant, help us shoot the movie, I can direct straight from the play manuscript and we’ll have the secretary type up the scenes everynight. That’s what the typists are for. It might be ‘bass ackwards’ but I think it might work. Right?”

Tennessee did not particularly like the phrase ‘ass backwards’ as it reminded him of his first awkwardly consummated homosexual relationship which had occurred in 1939 in St. Louis. As fate would have it, this relationship had been with Frank Bartholay, the Philippine expatriate who by then had realized there was no point in fighting his own homosexual tendencies because the Japanese were already well on their way to taking over the Philippines and all of Southeast Asia by then anyway and so there was little chance of him raising a militia to prevent that, so what the heck!. They had met when Bartholay had applied for a position in Tennessee’s uncle’s St. Louis shoe factory where he was working as a shoe blocker and something in Frank’s innocent, almost juvenile demeanor and fanciful self designed militia uniform had struck a chord in Tennessee.

Huston, totally unaware of the uncomfortably personal reminiscence he had precipitated. continued blithely, “Anyway, we start shooting at 6:00 AM, we, meet at the boat launch at 5:30 to get up the beach to where the sets will be. The crew arrived today and is working all night to build them.” he announced. Tennessee interjected, “Well the truth is, a lot of it you can shoot right in the hotel here. Most of the action takes place in a hotel. I am sure you can arrive at some accomodation with the owner of this fine establishment. I don’t think you need all those fancy sets”. (The crew actually eventually built the sets to look exactly like the hotel or possibly the hotel was remodeled at some point to look like the movie set, that part of the history is unclear), Huston continued, “you know, we’ll have regular sound stage for dialog that’ll be overdubbed, so we just need the broad brushstrokes right now. “ “Why of course you do.” Ten replied. “So, we’ll see you in the morning then.” This was more a command than a question. “Why of course you will” Tennessee replied again, summoning up a rather dashing smile without a trace of disdain and with that Huston signaled the bartender who in turn signaled the man with a brand new pink Plymouth coupe, who had by then recovered from his phlebitis enough to drive the new Plymouth which had been delivered that morning from Guadalajara and the two of them drove off, presumably to other less odiferous lodgings.

The problem of course was that the play was not nearly finished, in fact it was at that point merely a collection of sketches with no seeming logic, a limp skeleton with no connective tissue, there were Nazis parading a goat around a nondescript hotel bar in Bermuda shorts for no discernible reason and there were pages and pages of asexually bitchy dialog addressed to a cabdriver on the subject of the color ‘maroon’ and its social implications and paranoid accusations with nothing to hold them together except the consistent tone of inebriation tinged animosity. Tennessee put the hat back down on the other stool when Houston left, and uttered the word ‘C---sucker’ but this time with such sudden fierceness, that the bartender, seeing his glass was still full, brought him a whole bottle. Tennessee rising, put a five dollar bill on the bar and cradling the bottle in the crook of his arm, set out into the deepening twilight with a slight stagger, his white linen suit looking unusually bright in the late afternoon sunshine. The barman called after him, ‘Senor, Senor,--por favor’ and then he ran out with

the Panama Hat which Tennessee gratefully accepted and dusted off but did not put on. He then stepped off what was called a sidewalk but which in fact was merely two pieces of plywood that had been rather amateurishly painted to look like brick and into the dusty street.

He must have wandered for several hours, musing and cursing under his breath when he realized that he was somewhere out in what looked like the desert and that he had to take a fierce pee. As he fumbled in his shorts, suddenly there appeared like an apparition in the moonlight, a urinal that was seemingly floating in mid air, attached to nothing,--at first he had thought it was some kind of a shrine to the Virgin, such as the Mexicans were in the habit of erecting at odd places, gleaming like a single porcelain tooth in the desert, in the moonlight, but, as he approached and the function became apparent, it was clear what it was actually, was a urinal, --'I am one drunk motherfucker he said aloud as he began urinating into it. As he was relieving himself, a man quietly sidled up to him and he appeared to be fumbling for his member as well. "You are going to have to wait your turn sir, there only one fucking imaginary urinal here" Tennessee said. The man said nothing, but stood there uttering several evident sighs of relief. Finally not being able to restrain himself, Tennessee violated the urination code of conduct and glanced over briefly and astonishingly, the man was relieving himself into mid air, but obviously, that is not what was astonishing,--it appeared that the stream was disappearing after traveling a few feet just as if there was indeed an invisible urinal right next to the clearly visible imaginary one that Tennessee was using. "I heard of damn low humidity but blow me downwind with tumbleweed" Tennessee began, then, the man interrupted him. At least it seemed he was speaking, but it was more like words coming in a dream. He said, obviously misinterpreting Tennessee's remark as an overture "Blow ya, I don't even know ya". "hey," Tennessee interjected, "That's catchy,- maybe I can use it as the title of my new play". "Don't worry about the play,- Your spirit guide, will come this night to help you." Tennessee replied now gaining back his aplomb, put his hat back on, wiped his hands on the tequila bottle and pushed his black horn rim glasses back firmly with his forefinger. "Ohh,- really, well perhaps he'd like to suck my dick instead." The man reached out to flush the non-existent urinal but as his hand reached the apogee of its arc, its finger and arm extended yet frozen in some other parallel space-time that had imploded, like the big bang in reverse, coming just to rest at the tip of that finger and Tennessee's gaze fixated on it as if it held the key to his salvation. "I am el Brujo Caballo, the horse magician --watch for your Spirit guide." The sound of his voice seemed to merge with the desert, like something long used to husbanding its liquid, its essence, "I don't suppose you could ca(wwul)ll me a taxi at this time of night, sir." Tennessee blithely inquired after him,--but he, by then had disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared into the deepening night.

The following day, Alexandrov arrived with his entire crew ready to make the Topo Gigio movie. Topo Gigio was in fact a thinly veiled caricature of Stalin, a post mortem joke by the newly emboldened Alexandrov. He was hoping to use the Ferdinand-Lissitzky set which he had been told still existed somewhere out in the desert. Alexandrov had harbored a long simmering resentment against Stalin because of his obvious crush on his wife, Lyubov Orlova which dated back to the 1920s when he had seen her in Alexandrov's production of 'Merry Guys'. Stalin had subsequently gotten into the habit of awarding Soviet arts medals to Lyubov Orlova purposefully taking the first row in the hall for the awards ceremony enabling him to look up Orlova's skirt. He ascribed to Topo Gigio under similar circumstances the same schizophrenic giggle that had erupted from Stalin on these occasions. Stalin of course would never get to see the finished film.

Huston had once before worked on a project where the main characters seemed to be a collection of insane people. It had been for the department of the army on a project called 'Let There Be Light'.

This film had been shot at Willard Hospital for the Insane in upstate New York in 1944. It had been intended to show the effects of war on the mind and the apparent successes of psychiatry in curing war veterans of what came to be called post traumatic stress. In it he showed the mental suffering GIs had suffered in a Japanese POW camp. In the flashback sequence he employed a Philippine inmate of the institution at the time named Frank, to play the Japanese commandant, Furu Do Nandu, because he struck the exact right note of paranoid schizophrenia. “Huston uses a ‘tendentious film noir treatment’ with high contrast and dark shadows when showing the men’s suffering, and a progression towards brighter, more even lighting as recovery sets in. This film turns out to be a fairly crude propaganda effort, seeking to demonstrate that psychiatry can cure those who served their country in times of war, not just exterminate those it cannot cure.”²

Nixon shrewdly understood from experience therefore that he could trust Huston and Huston would be his ‘man in Puerto Vallarta’ keeping tabs both on the increasingly odd Tennessee and also on Alexandrov’s project. He wanted him to get Bogey for the part in “Night of the Iguana” but as a sop to Churchill who had supported the project he instead encouraged Huston instead to book Richard Burton with his evidently English declamation. The story that became Hollywood legend was that Tennessee Williams had actually been on a bender in the then relatively unknown resort town. On seeing the movie set magically spring into being before his very eyes that night, he believed that he may have inadvertently signed a contract and put his nose to the grindstone and pumps out both the stage version of ‘Night of the Iguana’ and the Screenplay version emerged within a month and a half. The truth, as we know, was somewhat different.

Later, when Nixon himself became president, he had ‘Night of the Iguana’ staged at the Ford’s theater. The review of this production in the Washington Post went as follows, “This play is the finest example of William’s manipulation of fantasies into realities and vice-versa. The play opens at the unreal setting of an insolated Mexican hotel in the tropical forests above a city. The time is equally unreal, it is set during the Battle of Britain. And fittingly, a family of Rubenesque dream Nazis parade around the hotel almost unnoticed wearing what looks like Philippino militia uniforms with swastika armbands, during this, their last hurrah. The characters we meet here are harshly and unbelievably real. Three loveless characters are caught in a bitter, power struggle.” Nixon was overheard to remark to a nervous looking French ambassador, whom he had cornered during intermission at Ford’s Theater during the premier, not without a hint of gloating “I was the one that had the sonuvabitch, write that mutherfucker.’ Which was after all, not all that far from the truth.

Topo Gigio never became a really big hit in Russia as the space race captured the imagination of the movie going public who now actually preferred propaganda films to the light musical fare that had become Alexandrov’s stock in trade but it had succeeded in capturing the imagination of the French movie public who ironically saw Topo Gigio as a refreshing naturalistic counterpoint to the thinly disguised, anti-naturalistic imperialist pretensions embodied by, Disney’s, Mickey. It was later released in an Italian language version in 1961 called ‘Le Avventure di topo Gigio’ and in America in 1965 as “The Magical World of Topo Gigio”.

2 “Lost Cases, Recovered Lives: Suitcases from a State Hospital” Albany Times Union by Paul Grondahl, 2004. In actual fact this was filmed at the Vet Hospital, not Willard. This factoid was altered for dramatic impact and continuity.

