



JEAN SHEPHERD

• Smiling out at me from a smudgy 65-line screen halftone, stand the Von Brunts of Minnesota and a block of crumpled metal that had once been their beloved VW. A simple "human interest" newspaper shot that has sent my mind spinning into my past in search of another Great Truth.

"If you have a problem that you can no way beat, use it. Y'hear me? Use it. Make it into something that you can capitalize on. That is one rule that every professional has to learn." The gaunt, cadaverous hawk-beaked sage who stalked back and forth in front of our acting class paused dramatically as only an old pro can, the kind of pro who can make boiled ham seem as precious as Beluga caviar. He sniffed meaningfully, his beady watery eye piercing each one of us in turn, the same gimlet stare that had made his *Second Gravedigger* a by-word in road companies throughout the land. I squatted in the second row among my fellow embryonic Equity members.

"Sir?" A weasel-faced guy in the front row—who had such an incredible case of malocclusion that he was known among his fellow students as Murray The Rat and who also tortured himself with the curious belief that he was incredibly handsome—raised his hand. "You mean like if you have a cold or have a headache or something?"

"My God, no!" The Gravedigger boomed, "I mean *real* problems. There must have been plenty of time in his early career when Jimmy Durante dreamed of having a nose job. One day he took the right step and built it into a career. Look at Barbra Streisand."

I have never forgotten this gem of Acting Lore. It was true in Shakespeare's time and it sure as hell is true today in the age of total and continuous Trouble. We hop from one hassle to the next. Watching the 7 o'clock news these days is about as gratifying as spending twenty-nine minutes rapping on the top of your head with a ballpeen hammer. Even the weatherman rounds it all off with his fairly standard promise of "Air Qual-

ity, Unacceptable." As one writer long ago noted, troubles never arrive as single foot soldiers. They come on the scene in battalions. And it is a well-documented fact. Ask Nixon. Or Agnew.

I think at this point in history we had better damn well resign ourselves to the fact that from here on in, trouble will be as much a fact of life as, say, gravity or rain or cockroaches. Now any good performer would know immediately what to do.

I'll never forget the time when the full force of the *Second Gravedigger's* lecture really came home. I was playing the lead in an Off-Broadway turkey that needed only a corps of vendors selling cranberry sauce to make the evening complete. Well sire, the night before the opening—and there is no more desperate time in the life of an actor than the night *before* an opening—I developed a gigantic sty in my left eye. By curtain time I felt like I was wearing a tennis ball clamped on my nose, and I could hardly see. My cue came and I lurched out on stage, falling heavily over a stuffed shoat which played some symbolic role in the plot, this being the Theater of the Absurd. The girl playing the romantic lead opposite me, hit by a sudden fit of uncontrollable nervousness, sneezed so hard her wig slipped down over her shoulderblades. The crowd roared, and the next three scenes went by like some nightmare out of an amateur

Don't get me wrong, I'm not one of those freaks who is pro-Trouble. But there's a lesson for all of us in the two-foot cube that sits in the middle of Nick Van Brunt's living room

French impressionistic horror film.

The next day the reviewer from the *Times* said: "Mr. Shepherd's incredibly evil slit-eyed leer was the high point of the evening. His portrayal of a maniac lover was . . ." Little did he know my evil leer was only a rotten sty, and if luck had been with me I would have merely looked my old gommy self. There is a lesson there for all of us.

Today our country is in drastic need of the advice of my old acting teacher. Instead of going with our problems, using them, turning them to a profit, we are fighting them, struggling against them, beating our collective heads against an invisible, implacable wall. These are the right thoughts that hit you, or at least hit me, as I skulk through the streets of Manhattan, surrounded on all sides by scenes of debauchery, decay, crime and chicanery.

There are signs, however; sporadic, true; spotty, yes, that a few individual citizens are

making breakthroughs. The time has come, however, for a massive and well-coordinated effort in this direction. Even Ralph Nader is showing signs of tiring.

I want to make this clear, as another *connoisseur* of trouble constantly puts it, *perfectly* clear. I am not pro-Trouble any more than I am pro-sty, but once you discover that it never goes away, you're moving into position to turn it into profit.

Take Watergate. Think what a fantastic LP the Watergate Tapes would make. Does Nixon realize what a gold mine he has? Why, even William Morris couldn't assemble a cast that could come within five light years of the one that Nixon has already, wrapped up in the can, ready for packaging. What with cassette rights, In-Flight entertainment sales to the airlines and a possible movie deal, Nixon overnight could be richer than good ole Bebe himself.

Agnew it would seem, has gotten the message; I understand he has already lined up a bulging string of "personal appearances," which naturally includes the college lecture circuit, numerous Rotary clubs and probably a TV special or two. As an old pol he knows how to turn sin into a positive and lucrative virtue, given the proper breaks.

Believe it or not, I think this is a healthy sign that our country is beginning to grow up. Not that it is ready to laugh off trouble, but that it is acquiring the humor necessary to put it into perspective. You can't tell me that Sam Ervin, drawing out "Bridge Over Troubled Waters" doesn't have its humorous aspect. After all, athletes—who generally have about as much ability to deliver a line as your average walrus—seem to have no trouble making it big in the films. Merely because they *are* athletes people crowd in to see them. Just think of what Gordon Liddy could command playing a secret agent in Steve McQueen's latest wide-screen caper, even without that cockamamie red wig that the CIA gave him. Good grief, if *Gone with the Wind* made fifty million bucks, think what this one would do!

I'd pay to see it, for one. Wouldn't you? Any red-blooded student of Adversity would have to make that one.

In addition, it would solve the problem which has plagued our republic for almost 200 years, namely what to do with out-of-work Presidents.

All this may come to pass, because people are learning to have fun with their troubles and make them pay off. There are brave pioneers in this field everywhere, and I salute Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas Van Brunt of Mahtomedi, Minnesota, who paid \$375 for a VW in 1968 and drove it for 175,000 miles. Then some sneaky bastard in the dead of night stole the engine right of it, so they had the car pressed into a two-foot cube, laid a slab of glass on top of it and hence had one hell of a coffee table. The picture in the paper shows them with big fat smiles, beaming at what's left of their poor old VW. There's a lesson in that for all of us.