

This is the last time I shall write down my thoughts and send them to you. Walking through New York today on a beautiful winter's Day, I suddenly knew with joyful certainty that this was to be my last journal entry. It is the natural ending to this chapter in my life. I am starting on a new road, a new life.

I came here in 2001, and these last seven years have been an extraordinary odyssey, incorporating the horror of 9/11 to the magical experience of playing Shakespeare at the White House before the president and First Lady. Traveling from New York to Florida, California to Bermuda, New Mexico to Alaska, I have visited 47 of the 50 states and with the Aquila Theatre Company have taken part in delivering theatre and Shakespeare to a new generation who are encountering it for the first time. It has been a wonderful adventure; an actor's journey. In many ways we followed the example of our Elizabethan ancestors. We played the big city and we presented our work before the most powerful ruler in the Western Hemisphere. But we also traveled far and wide to smaller towns and cities, and it is their gratitude and excitement that has provided the biggest rewards.

For those of you who have told me how much they enjoy my journal entries – whether truthfully or not – thank you for the encouragement that made me continue. For those of you who have found it self indulgent, banal and annoying clutter in the inbox – I can only agree and apologize. I always wondered why I came here. What was I hoping to achieve? The answer was surprising: It's about other people. It wasn't really about me at all.

There will be more adventures, more interesting people, new directions to experience and explore, but this chapter has come to a close. And whither then? I cannot say.

Citizenship

Sunday May 27th 2001

Iselin, NJ

I have arrived for the great American adventure. It's raining and I feel like death. I had the meal on the plane and woke up to someone kicking me in the stomach... at least that's what it felt like. I suppose it's my nerves and I'm hoping that it'll disappear by tomorrow. I have no time to be ill now. Jim and Jack have made me wonderfully welcome, and I basically have the run of the top floor of the house. I can't quite believe that I'm here... and that I'm here for so long.

I feel like Frodo at the beginning of The Lord of the Rings, and at the moment I wish I were home. I was incredibly touched by the send-off by family and friends over the last few weeks. They are so excited for me. I don't want to let them down. So tomorrow it's Richard - Babe in the City. It's Memorial Day, so it won't be crowded. I have the train ticket; I have the schedule; and all I need now is to be fit and well ready to meet Aquila and New York!



...whence came all these people? They are a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes... What, then, is the American, this new man? He is neither an European nor the descendant of an European; hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new

mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. . . . The Americans were once scattered all over Europe; here they are incorporated into one of the finest systems of populations which has ever appeared."

– Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur, Letters from an American Farmer.

February 10th 2007

Brooklyn

The *American Dream*, as I understand it, is the belief that through hard work and determination, any United States immigrant can achieve a better life, usually in terms of financial prosperity and enhanced personal freedom of choice. This Dream has been a major factor in attracting immigrants such as me to the United States. Although I initially came here for someone else, the ideology of this 'Dream' has become more interesting.

According to historians, the rapid economic and industrial expansion of the U.S. is not simply a function of being a resource rich, hard working, and inventive country, but that anybody could get a share of the country's wealth if he or she was willing to work hard. Many have also argued that the basis of the American greatness is how the country began without a rigid class structure at a time when other countries in Africa, Europe, China, India and Latin America had a much more stratified social structures. The term the American dream was first used by the writer James Truslow Adams in 1931 in his book *The Epic of America*. His words seem to still capture its essential essence:

he put

“The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”

I know how men in exile feed on dreams of hope.
Aeschylus (525 BC - 456 BC), *Agamemnon*

I knew it would be a special day. But when the date arrived for my final citizenship interview, the signs

did not bode well. My last citizenship hurdle was scheduled to take place on *Blue Monday*. Psychologists have worked out that the penultimate Monday in January is the unhappiest day in the entire year. Unpaid Christmas bills, nasty weather, and failed New Year's resolutions combine to make it the gloomiest in the calendar.

The interview was the last step in my citizenship application- a process that has taken me over seven years. To prepare, I was required to learn the answers to one hundred questions on American history and political system. The United States Department of Immigration and Naturalization also wanted confirmation that I was comfortable with spoken and written English.

And so for the last few weeks I have been buried in learning about the War of Independence, the Founding Fathers, the Boston Tea Party, the Civil War and much more; along with deciphering the political mechanics of how the country is governed. The more I read, the more incredible it seemed to me were the words of the Founding Fathers, who drew up the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Human nature will always undermine human idealism, but somehow their message of optimism, hope, appealing to the higher virtues in mankind, seems to have endured up to the present day.

So, on *Blue Monday*, after a sleepless night, feeling both nervous and excited, I entered the Federal Plaza Building in downtown Manhattan whose third floor is the home of the New York branch of Homeland Security and Immigration.

Unlike my last Green Card interview, I was back in the Kafka world of waiting and attempting to interpret the faceless bureaucracy. An hour and a half later I was taken into the inner sanctum of Homeland Security and seated in the office of my interrogator. She was a handsome woman of Indian descent and a Spanish name. Before we could begin, another officer entered and asked her a question about an applicant. The interrogator looked at the presented file and then returned it her colleague with a shake of her head.

"Look, he's lying. He's lying. He's just a trainee; he's not actually in the military. He will have to come back. Believe me. He's lying through his teeth."

As she sat opposite me, I noticed that I was actually holding my breath. I knew the interview would be nerve-racking, but I also had other concerns. On my return from recent flights to the UK I had been summoned into Secondary Immigration and interrogated. This started soon after I had submitted my citizenship application. I was eventually told by one of the immigration officers that a question-mark had appeared on my file. I had no idea what the question could be but I was expecting to be asked for an answer during the interview - this interview.

The first thing I was asked to do was reiterate my written allegiance to the United States and verify that my application information was unchanged. My recent trips were then added on to the last five years' total days out of the country. She wanted to make sure that I had not gone over the limit of permitted days out of the country.

I then signed my full name: *Richard John Sheridan Willis*.

Suddenly, without warning, she launched into the American history and politics questions.

I was ready. I sailed through the answers, even making her half smile when I gave the full address for the White House. I was then asked to write down three sentences she read out to me... which of course proved no problem.

Finally she leafed through my file. And she kept looking... and looking. I held my breath again, expecting the real interrogation to begin. I noticed she paid particular attention to the letters that family and friends had written. The letters were written and provided as proof to Homeland Security that my last marriage was not one of convenience.

The air in the office seemed to become heavy. I was starting to sweat. I had underdressed for the cold weather outside, but it was warm inside her small office.

Time slowed.

With a sigh, she put down the file and looked up at me.

"Mr. Willis... that's it."

I was confused.

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that's it. You're done. You just have to go back to the waiting area and wait for your appointment letter for the Oath of Allegiance ceremony."

Half an hour later I received my appointment letter. I was stunned to find that the Oath of Allegiance

ceremony, which normally has a period of at least six weeks after the citizenship interview, would take place three days later. Someone was on my side. *Blue Monday* suddenly became a lot brighter.

Communism doesn't work because people like to own stuff.
Frank Zappa

Three days later I returned to the same building. It was the coldest day in New York for two years, but that didn't stop me wearing a suit and tie. It's something I usually only do when I'm in a play. I have made it a tradition to always wear a suit on my first nights.

Once more I went through security and caught the elevator up to the third floor.

Herding us into line were two Homeland Office members of staff who could have walked out of a fantasy film or Mervyn Peake novel. They were gothic and bizarre, and had the look of human vultures - with thick New York accents.

Now that we were soon-to-be fellow citizens, we were treated with a discernibly different attitude than on our previous visits. One of the vultures would bow extravagantly as he showed people the line. It was a low sweeping bow using his arms like windmills at his side which he finally left in front of himself as if offering a precious gift. He stooped close to the ground, to give the action a dramatic flourish. The other vulture had a nervous twitch and beatific smile. As we shuffled into the next room five at a time, new arrivals were greeted by the same words.

"Have ya gat ya ledda?" "Bring ya green cawead with ya?" Ain't gonna be lawng now, just keep movin'!"

Eventually we were led into the very same waiting room we had sat in three days earlier. The atmosphere this time was very different. Nervous tension had been replaced with a celebratory mood. However none of us dared believe that this would be the end of the journey. Was this really the last step of the immigration road?

The waiting room had been turned into a theatre with the help of two American flags, a lectern and four television sets. Whilst we were shown to our seats, the TVs showed video snapshots of the country - our country: from Maine to New Mexico; Florida to California. On the seats we found small welcome packets. Inside was a crooked photocopy of the National Anthem, the Oath and Pledge of Allegiance and a welcome letter from our president.

Three hundred and seventy-five of us crammed into the waiting-room along with a small group of family and friends.

We waited one last time.

Suddenly the room stirred and all eyes looked front. Our officiators took their seats in front of us, smiling broadly. One of them walked up to the lectern. He told us we were following in the footsteps of long line of immigrants that had come before. He reminded us of our responsibilities: to be good neighbors, to vote, to take pride in our new country... We were then asked to stand and sing the National Anthem. I had been told that the word *Freedom* has the highest note in the song because it is so difficult to attain. But I never got there. I was overcome with emotion halfway through the singing. I don't know where the emotion came from or why I was effected so strongly.

In a blur, we took the Oath... right hand raised. I noticed a woman of African descent held her right hand high into the air as if in a prayer meeting.

And then the Pledge... with the right hand over the heart. As we finished, the officiator told us to sit and then his face broke into a huge smile.

"Welcome and congratulations. I know how hard and how long you've worked for this moment. You are now citizens of the United States of America."

Since that moment, I have examined how I feel about my new status.

The answer is... ridiculously proud.

I do have dual nationality. I still have my UK passport, but at this moment here is where I feel at home. This country is where immigrants have always come to re-invent themselves, and in a way that is what I'm doing. I have always felt an inner drive to come here. After 9/11 and subsequent personal travails I was presented with a clear choice: To stay here or return to the UK?

The easiest option was to return to family and friends and that support group. However I knew this country was where I was meant to be. I stayed.

I like the idealism and childlike innocence of America, which despite all its faults still has the feeling that anything is possible, that there are no limits, that this is the country where everyone aspires to live out the American Dream and believe...

"...certain truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness."

It's just a dream of course, but one I think that - for me - is worth pursuing.

Later that same day I bumped into an English actor at an audition. When I told him about the citizenship he grimaced.

"I couldn't do that. I just couldn't, you know. It's just... I'm **English** and to swear allegiance to the American flag... well, would just feel wrong."

I shrugged. I felt no guilt. I felt no dark feelings of doubt or misgiving.

I felt nothing...

but joy.

My happiness must have come across at the audition because I got the part. I'm now on my way to the Denver Theater Company in Colorado to do Shaw's Mrs. Warren's Profession.

After that, who knows? I will continue following the dream. Someone asked me if the attraction of the States was the lure of better earnings. It's not. I'm still trying to pursue whatever makes me feel passionate.

No. It's not about big money, but the small change.

The pillars of the American Dream -- a college degree, a home, a secure retirement, and the chance to get ahead in a growing economy -- are central to our basic values. When we demand responsibility, it makes our families, our markets, and our democracy stronger. When our success depends on how hard we work, not how well we're born, there is no limit to how high we'll reach or how far we'll go. America needs a new direction steeped in our oldest values. The struggles of the last few years are America's past, not America's future. The American Dream has just begun.

Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton

In my Christmas entry I'm afraid I was rather uncomplimentary about Queens. It was firmly pointed out to me by a friend that, in fact, crime rates are significantly higher in Brooklyn than Queens. It is actually a very family-oriented neighborhood and quite safe. And that Astoria, where I was living, is as different from Jamaica, Queens (where the shooting that I described took place) as, say, Park Slope is from East New York. I was crudely attempting to convey my feelings of midwinter blues and I'm afraid that Queens took the brunt; quite unfairly. I was quite rightly pulled up for not checking my facts and for generalizing to make things more interesting for my readers. All of which I cannot deny and I wholeheartedly apologize.

I had forgotten this. Here is a postscript to the Confessions of a Call Girl audition. This was the audition I attended last summer which ended with the Doctor asking to be whipped by the friendly call girl! I wish it had a more extreme ending, but I suppose in the end, nothing could surpass the script.

May 2006:

Before I attended the 'Confessions' audition, I had another interview for The Two Rivers Theater in New Jersey. I received the sides and was disappointed that it was for an urbane upper class Englishman. I also noted that the same actor was also required to play a down-to-earth American, but apparently that character wasn't requested at this meeting. As I made my way into the city and over to 8th Avenue, it

hit me once again how strange that I should be auditioning in New York. I wonder if I'll ever stop seeing the romantic side of the life here... or perhaps it's vital that I do.

I had auditioned for the casting director before and I knew he liked me. This after initially being unimpressed on our first meeting where he had told Honey, my agent, that I seemed a little quiet and reserved... which, of course, I am! I returned the next day and blew him away (I mean that in a sense of dazzling acting virtuosity and not by anything smutty!) playing a gay man from Brooklyn.

So today he greeted me warmly and we briefly chatted outside the audition room before he ushered inside and introduced me to the director. I stopped dead in my tracks. The man who came over to shake my hand was someone whose face I knew very well indeed. It had been a part of my life - or at least in the background of my life - for over twenty-five years. He introduced himself.

"I know you. You're an actor." I exclaimed.

The man looked startled for a moment, but composed himself quickly. I noted as we exchanged small talk, how strange it was to converse with the director. It's not something that's very common on auditions over here. But then he was British.

As we talked I thought back to the description my first wife had given me of his character. She was a cockney actress and had the lead in a West End Play. The British actor/Director who was now asking me to dive in and read, played her boyfriend in the play, which soon - as these things often do - graduated to real life. He was public school stock and proceeded to do a complete Pygmalion makeover on her cockney persona. She started to read classics, she listened to classical music, and she even changed her accent to Received Pronunciation. They were together for the run of the play and then he left her and immigrated to America. When I met her, she was still getting over him. I was certainly impressed with the books she had read and her knowledge of literature and music, and in some way I often think that if he had not changed her, I would never have been involved with her,... or her with me.

After the reading he said:

"Well that was easy for you of course. Have you done an America accent... I mean have you done one over here?"

I told him that I had just been playing an American for the last four months in Jekyll & Hyde - a 19th Century English educated American admittedly, but I didn't... admit it, I mean.

He asked me how long I had been in the States and I told him that I had lived here since 2001.

"I've been here 25 years," he said quickly, and there was just a tone in his voice that made me think - as I have found myself thinking about other English actors over here - you need to earn the right to work here and it's going to take some time. I haven't yet, but I am determined to find a way to do it without trading in on the 'English-ness.'

He had certainly earned his 'right' and was now a very successful Broadway Brit actor. He was friendly to me and I think he had no idea of how I knew him. We said goodbye and he told me to get hold of a copy of the script for the callbacks. I knew I wouldn't need a script. There was going to be no callback.

I had a couple of hours to kill before the audition for Confessions of a Call Girl. I spent it soaking up New York on a beautiful Spring Day. The humidity won't kick in for another month yet, which makes this one of the most pleasant times of year.

At six o'clock I arrived at the address I had been given by my agent and was buzzed up to the third floor. I was greeted at the top of the stairs by a large sweating man dressed all in black and told that I was in the wrong place. It was obvious the same mistake had been made before as he pointed me to the correct building across the street.

Up another three flights of stairs, I entered a room that had eight actors sitting around in various states of distress, all looking like they were Looking for Godot or had landed in the Twilight Zone. The temperature in the room was 80 degrees and the monitor had her small child with her that kept asking her questions about homework. I waited in the room for 50 minutes before a woman entered and said that I would be next. As I got up, she said that the part I had been going up for was taken. This was the part, if you remember, of the masochistic doctor who ended up - like Oliver - asking for more. I found myself strangely disappointed. I was never going to have the opportunity to say the line I had been rehearsing in my head all day - "More baby, more!" Instead I now had been given a new part... "Guy at the Bar".

After a cursory read and a quick rundown from the assistant that the "Guy at the Bar" should have 'a husky voice and be pretty mean', I walked in and was confronted by the Confessions of a Call Girl creative team. There were **ten** people in the room. I noted the casting director, an eccentric Sarah Miles look-alike smiling manically. There was a five minute delay as, rather worryingly I thought, the video camera had broken down. Finally the director told the cameraman to forget it, and that he didn't need to see me on film.

I didn't think this was a good sign. I read with a young actress, and as instructed kept the voice husky and the face in a permanent snarl.

The director interrupted.

"Please, don't act. Could you just be yourself, just be natural..."

I lamely offered the excuse that I had only just seen the script.

"I don't care about the script, for God's Sake. Improvise, move around... be you!"

I always find this a very strange direction to any actor. We want to become *other* people. I ended up doing a Clive Owen in 'Closer' mode, and threw snarling and huskiness vocal mannerisms out, and brought in Northern English laid back chic. There was a silence after I finished. Taking the hint I made to leave, but the casting director stood up and cried out:

"What's that accent? Is it Scottish?"

"Um...it whatever you want it to be," I said rather crossly having had enough of waiting, the temperature, and a director who was clearly unimpressed.

"No, what is it? Scottish, right?"

"It's English," I said. "I'm from England".

"Oh really? You sound so beautiful."

I left with a sigh and a heavy heart. Clearly my determination to not trade in on my Englishness was going to be sorely tested in the maelstrom and cutthroat world of the job-seeking Manhattan actor.

Today was another day and a different audition. A Brit again. The bad guy in a new series being filmed - in all places - Toronto. I tried to be more -um - me. Things improved. Hell, the camera even worked.

Afterwards I went with Heidi to a screening of The Big Bad Swim at Loews 34th Street. I was going to go to the premiere, but found I was just too exhausted to attend the 10 o'clock night showing after having just arrived back from the tour. I have a small cameo part in the film, a good short scene with the lead.

I realized as I sat down that, quite remarkably, I had never seen myself on the big screen. The theatre was packed as the film is part of the Tribeca film festival. It is a sweet gentle film. An ensemble piece, with writing that is character driven. It is poignant and funny. I held my breath as my scene came up. I look older now, but the face is interesting...and the acting?... well... I wasn't theatrical, I wasn't even embarrassing.

I was natural, laidback, interesting.

I was...

me.

*The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with eager feet
Until it joins some larger way
Where many paths and errands meet.*

*And whither then?
I cannot say.*

J.R.R. Tolkein