

## **Mister Roberts - A 50 year Love Affair - Conclusion**

At the end of my original essay, I announced that it had been decided to open “Mister Roberts” on July 4, 2017 on the aft deck of the USS North Carolina. The Thalian Association Community Theatre (TACT) would be the producing company. The fact that my vision was embraced with such enthusiasm was astounding. The incredible speed at which everything was put into place was even more astonishing. This decision was reached in less than a month. Scott Conant acted on my behalf at all the meetings. He kept me apprised along the way. We were both confident that I would be an integral part of a terrific collaboration. A meeting between me and all the parties was scheduled on April 13, 2016 so I could meet everyone and they could put a face to the person who brought the idea to them. We would also determine at that time the extent of my role and how I could be compensated. That date was set because I was going to a small sci-fi con in Atlanta the following weekend and by combining the two events, my travel expenses would be minimal.

I recounted in part 1 how, over that initial three week period, logistically all the production details had been basically worked out. Towards the end of March, Scott took Tori Jones, the marketing director for TACT and Susan Habas, the director of the production, to lunch just to say how excited I was to be coming back to Wilmington and to lay a little ground work for anything we might talk about. Scott recounted to me how Susan as an employee of TACT kept reiterating that she could not be a part of any discussions re money. She did however say that she was pretty sure she had a friend that would be travelling that summer and there was a good possibility that I could stay in her cottage. Free lodging. Nothing was set in concrete at this lunch, but in his subsequent note to me Scott excitedly told me in his opinion we were good to go.

On March 30, 2016 – I received this terse, formal, laweresque communication from Tori Jones informing me that after considerable deliberation, because of TACT’s non-profit charter and also due to the theatre’s limited financial resources, it was determined by all the producing parties that they could not utilize me as part of the production.

What the hell happened? I wish I knew the truth. This abrupt dismissal came totally out of the blue and when I tried to inquire why everyone had suddenly changed their mind, I was told brusquely that no further discussion would be entertained.

SO - - I can only guess, and I do want to stress that this is solely my opinion. It is not based on my personal experiences with these people. I never met any of them. I was not present for any of the subsequent meetings that Scott attended on my behalf. I was back in California. All my information came from Scott, and my opinion is based on what I deduced from his reports.

One of my great fears since I thought up this scheme and Scott Conant and I began the process of presenting it to the theatre community of Wilmington, and the Committee for the restoration of the USS North Carolina, was that I would not be physically present at any of the subsequent meetings. Nobody would see my totally unabashed enthusiasm and commitment to this project. I would be this distant

entity. Because of my many experiences with established provincial community theatres, I was terrified that I could be perceived as this professional Hollywood actor / theatre director who was going to drop out of the blue and tell everyone how run everything. I had been down that road before. Yes, this was my idea and I absolutely wanted to be an integral part of the project. Scott went out of his way at every meeting to stress that I absolutely wanted to be a part of the team, not come in and take over. Once the decision was made to present "Mister Roberts" on the aft deck of the North Carolina my value would increase because I knew the play intimately. I had done it six times as an actor and director. I had been thinking about staging it on a ship since 1972. I had many ideas on how to mount the production, including a reimagined opening that would have amazed audiences. I also had ideas on how to promote the project that would have expanded interest way beyond the City of Wilmington. Finally, I gave them a good choice for the actor to play Doc. Scott and I both saw this as a win/win situation for everyone.

COMMON SENSE!!! It had to be clear from the beginning that if I was going to travel to Wilmington NC, stay there for at least six weeks, assist in the production as an authority on the play, technical advisor, actor, and even publicist, and also feed myself, I would have to be compensated. This was not a surprise. Everyone knew this. The trick was how to do this without violating TACT's charters.

From the beginning there was one absolute. The Thalian Association Community Theatre of Wilmington could have nothing to do with hiring me or paying me in any way. The non-profit charter they operate under forbids them from paying anyone. This was stressed by David Lauder milk, their artistic director and Susan Habas, their resident director and was clear and understood by everyone. This is not an unusual phenomenon. Most community theatres operate this way. That's why community actors perform for free. They were certainly interested in having me on board. They just did not want to know anything about any possible compensation. I would just be an actor who played Doc and helped with staging and publicity.

Anything and everything that related to possible payment for me would be handled by Scott Conant who would work closely with Clove Marketing, the company that markets the theatre's productions. Scott offered to volunteer extensively his time and expertise to solicit additional advertizing and sponsorships on top of the theatre's normal sources of income. A small portion of these additional funds would be set aside to pay me. The rest would be another source of revenue for the theatre and the restoration of the battleship. Clove marketing's initial and even subsequent enthusiasm for this idea led Scott and me to believe this would not be hard to do. Given the uniqueness of the production and the fact that one of the priorities of the city of Wilmington was to find ways to attract new business and tourism, we both were pretty sure there would be sufficient excitement and interest in the local business community.

Although nobody said anything, this issue of money and paying me had to be where the "chancere gnawed". The theatre had never paid for talent. TACT is a community theatre. Actors perform for free. How would the local talent pool react when word got out that the person playing Doc was from the west coast and was being paid? AND - - believe me - - word always gets out.

I probably immediately raised a huge red flag when I initially stated I hoped there could be a way for me to perform under an AEA contract. Ordinarily union contracts are generated by the theatre and, as I have said, TACT could have nothing to do with this in any way shape or form. One of Scott's responsibilities would have been to find a company that would act as a producer who could hire me without actually involving TACT. In hindsight I should have realized just the presence of an AEA banner would signal to the local community that a paid professional was involved. It certainly scared TACT. Every correspondence I got kept stating that TACT couldn't be involved. I already knew that. I kept reassuring everyone via email that involving AEA might not necessarily be a problem. I wish I could have been on the scene. I think I could have prevented and alleviated a lot of anxieties and trouble spots. Scott, who had years of promotional experience did the best he could, but his expertise was not in show business. Still Scott and I both thought we could overcome any lingering obstacles.

In the end I actually offered to withdraw completely from AEA which would reduce me to amateur status. This was not a decision I took lightly. I have been a member of the performing unions for 48 years. I am proud to be a professional. I like to think I am good at what I do. I wanted to be seen. AND – this whole thing was my idea. Still, doing this would solve every problem when it came to my appearing in a TACT production -- or so we thought.

INTERLUDE -- I cannot begin to try and explain the advantages and huge disadvantages of being a member of the performing unions in the modern entertainment world. When I was younger and way more active, my unions allowed me to be seen by people who could hire me, and established the guidelines so I was paid a respectable salary for my artistic endeavors. This has completely changed. Modern entertainment production has evolved incredibly fast into new more exciting landscapes. The performing arts unions are woefully behind in their effort to regulate the new media and protect its members. Film, television, and theatrical productions are produced all over the world, and the vast majority of it is non-union. Actors want to work. They want to be seen. It is their passion. Today they have endless opportunities on social media to promote themselves and they are not dependant on agents or the performing arts unions to get hired. And they get hired -- and they go to work. We all know from reality shows like American Idol, So You Think You Can Dance, The Voice, America Has Talent, and other shows that there are many extraordinarily talented people in the world. Unfortunately, being non-union they have no say over what they get paid or have any protection when it comes to their health and physical well being. Still -- laughingly we can all say, if you want somebody to work for nothing -- get an actor. I have been asked over and over by young actors if I think it is important for them to join the union. I honestly don't know any more.

Truthfully, my decision to withdraw from AEA was made easier knowing that union contracts are becoming much rarer. Unless "On Golden Pond" becomes a musical, any part I play would likely be supporting and the few AEA contracts available always go to the leads.

This now left only what type of compensation would be available and suddenly the back pedaling started. Tori Jones had the audacity to look Scott in the eye at that final luncheon and say nobody ever anticipated I might deserve anything more than a token stipend of \$500. ARE YOU KIDDING ME ???

Scott lobbied strenuously for some common sense. I was the person who brought this idea to everyone's attention. TACT in its 200 year history, and for the 50 plus years the USS North Carolina had been berthed in Wilmington Harbor, had never considered producing anything aboard the ship. What I proposed would have been an incredible win/win for the entire Wilmington community. It would certainly help generate funds for the restoration of the ship. It would also provided another feather in the cap for the respected Thalian Association Community Theatre - - another innovation in their long history of theatrical presentations. Finally the City of Wilmington which is desperately trying to attract new business and tourism would benefit in many ways from the publicity surrounding the production - - publicity that I could generate not only because of my complete knowledge of the play and its historical significance, but also as a long term respected person in the entertainment industry.

All along it had to be obvious to everyone that if I had to come from California and spend six weeks in Wilmington, extra funds would have to be raised. That's what the additional outside sponsors were for. A \$500 stipend besides being insulting, defied all business logic.

Scott proposed a ridiculously reasonable contract - a weekly salary of \$600 for six weeks totaling \$3600 and a plane ticket which if purchased far enough ahead of time would cost around \$400. The entire outlay (slightly dependent on Susan's ability to procure the cottage) would have been around \$4,000 for a six week period. This was a pittance. I would not have profited much, but at least I would not lose money while I was in Wilmington. At the end of that last luncheon Scott thought he had negotiated everything necessary to my being able to participate. He was confident. He was excited. We both looked forward to my meeting everyone.

Then we got that delightful letter.

Here is what I think really happened. I think that someone higher in the administration of TACT nixed everything. I think the powers that be resorted to the same old claustrophobic short term thinking that permeates local theatre and looked to protect their status as big fish in tiny ponds. I was an outsider. TACT had functioned very well for 200 years without bringing in outside paid help. Why should they change that strategy? Besides, - THEY NOW HAD THE IDEA. I GAVE IT TO THEM. THEY DID NOT NEED ME ANY MORE. So - - they told me and Scott to take a hike. Granted, they don't have all my ideas but truthfully, they have capable local talent and I am sure they will figure out how to mount the production.

I am saddened and disappointed greatly. Last October when I first laid eyes on the USS North Carolina, all of this seemed like destiny to me. We were absolutely in the right place in the right time with a great idea. We had the ship, the theatre, and the city, and everyone would prosper. It was Kismet. I have spoken of life circles and my love for this wonderful play. I started with it and I honestly thought this was going to be my swan song. - - The Eleven O'clock number. It just was not to be