

An interview with Stuart Boydston by Topher House

(Stuart Boydston was born in Ephrata, Washington circa 1948. In the mid-fifties, his family moved to Up-state New York. He later served in Vietnam on a Naval minesweeper in the Saigon ship channel. The following interview took place at Mr. Boydston's residence on March 23rd, 2006. – Topher House)

Q: Which movies made an impression on you in the 50s and 60s?

A: “Back in those days, Technicolor was 25 or 30 percent of the pictures—usually a cowboy picture—the rest [were] black and white. There was a film, “Wild is the Wind”, and I would love to see it again because it was filmed in my home country. I think it was made in the late 50s or early 60s. It starred the Italian beauty, Anna Magnani, and Tony Franciosa and they're up there in Eastern Washington. Tony Franciosa is playing a ranch hand and Anna Magnani is married to a Basco¹, a Sheeper or something. There were shots of thousands of sheep crossing those old highways and going down into the coulees.² I was probably watching this in a drive-in in New York and I'm thinking, ‘Shit! That's my home country.’ Upon leaving the theater, my mother, who had been a professional singer and was quite youthful—probably in her thirties at the time, remarked of Anna Magnani, ‘Oh, she's as homely as a mud fence.’ My mother the former “Chickie Wade”³, referred to Anna Magnani as being ‘as homely as a mud fence.’ That stuck in my mind.”

Q: What films informed your early political perspective?

A: “A lot of stuff. I went to a few films with my mother. The decision to go to these films was made by one's elders and as a kid you don't question the motives of your elders. I remember one was called “The Inn of the Sixth Happiness” and it took place in mainland China during in the 30s when the Japanese were starting to go in there. It was from the standpoint of a Caucasian missionaries and a bunch of Chinese. The missionaries were trying to evacuate Chinese kids. A song from the movie became a hit song, [singing] ‘This old man, do-do-do,’ whatever. It was sung by these sweet-faced little kids. And there was the Japanese guy escorting the white lady and these little kids and the Japs did ‘em in. I don't know why we happened to go see that movie—this would have been a couple of years after the end of Korea—but I remember thinking in my head, ‘there were a lot of people in Asia and some of them were nice people and some of them were bad people.’ I was just trying to balance that equation. Watching the movie, as a little kid, I remember being a little bit sad. The funny thing is this, it was only a couple of years later, I went to this YMCA camp, I was about nine, and we had these platform tents and walled tents and one night we went to some campfire. Some

kid had heated up a butter knife in the fire and handed it to me, I burned myself. The councilors freaked out and evacuated me back to the base camp... They eventually left me there with my councilor, who had a Korean name. He was a college student, going to some Christian college. As it turned out he was fucking drunk on his fucking ass... He had gone out with some other college kids and had gotten really fucked up. By this point he was morose, he was fucking weeping. And I'm just a kid... patting him on the shoulders... and he starts talking about some battle where he's in Korea behind a machine-gun. I'm nine or ten years old, a little kid with my short pants, blisters on my fingers and he's telling about this shit. I'm patting him on the shoulder, and what not, and wondering, 'what the hell is this shit about?' And that's when I started to get a different stance on what the Korean War was all about, because supposedly we had won Korea and here's this guy weeping, he's sobbing, telling me about how he wakes up in the morning behind his machine-gun, the sun comes up and there a big ole pile of Chinese beside him. Yah, strange shit man, strange shit. I'll tell you what, mass production, manifest destiny, central banking, that's what we want to think about. We don't want to think about mother earth or the sky father. We don't want to think about the sacred songs sung by the sea turtle or Coelacanth, fuck no. Short-term goals. I tell you what, Dick Cheney, you haven't had your dick sucked, 'til you've had it sucked by a motherfuckin' Coelacanth."

On the film "The Mouse that Roared" "I remember laughing. I remember that we sat in the front row. The theater was a Quonset hut and the seats were military issue, they were not bucket seats. I remember spasmodically laughing and flowing out of the seat on to the floor. There may have been as many as eight or nine takers in the theater. I was just lying on the floor and laughing at the satire. I had heard, by this time, some LPs of the "Goon Show" with Peter Sellers and Spike Milligan from BBC recordings. I had heard them as background at my friend George's house. His parents were erudite, shortwave and what not. I remember myself saying, 'this is Peter Sellers from the 'Goon Show.'" Slowly it dawned on me that he was playing not one, not two, not three, but multiple roles. In my budding consciousness I thought, 'this is cool shit. This is cool satire.' Within weeks, I manage to seek out at the public library the actual book. I discovered that was actually a stage play before a film. And then, imagine my surprise to discover that there was a sequel to the stage play, both of which I devoured: "The Mouse that Roared" and "The Short Reign of Pipen the III." I didn't have any contact with Peter Sellers for a period. Then, a few years later, with my physiognomy growing (as well as my ability to drive a car, and the opportunity to do so), I found myself at a drive-in in Dutchess County, New York, in a town called Rhinebeck, in a faded turquoise Ford Falcon wagon watching "Dr. Strangelove." Across from me in the passenger's seat, a young co-ed, I don't think I was yet matriculating at University, but somehow I found myself in the driver's seat of this compact wagon with a young co-ed. A co-ed I'd

seen in the summertime in a swimsuit, the next older sister of my friend George. May have been one of those miracles of St. Ann. But, we were watching “Dr. Strangelove” and I had obtained any number of amorous simulations with Betsy Nailer; as if her name was a mantra an inducement. Yes. I had it all plotted out. It was very mechanistic, it was kind of like remembering how to do algebra or shift the gears on a three-on-the-tree gearshift... I had the petting of Betsy Nailer plotted out in my head. The thing was, that fucking movie grabbed me by the consciousness. That movie shook me in some ways. I laughed. I got it. I didn’t grope Betsy. I laughed. I was a total “Joe the Sardonic.” I got the whole thing. One of the interesting things is I don’t think I saw the movie for another twenty odd years and it was etched into my memory like acid. It was in there. And, it still is in there. You know a little bit prior to that movie, was the Cuban Missile Crisis. And, about four or five years prior to that, I had actually gone to the Russian Trade Show, in Manhattan, with my Dad on a business trip, wearing my first long pants, staring up at tall Ruskie with their double-breasted suits in their Khrushchev hats looking at all their dioramas like they were the winners of some socialist science fair and being owed, like they had the greatest train sets in the world; yet, in my little kid-coyote way, realizing that they were not the way. I found myself being coyote in that day. I remember speaking to them sharply, but politely. Some hours later, back at the house, my father commended me, telling me I was a warrior for talking to those big, tall Communist men... I remember my father really loved me; he gave me a big hug. He was warm to me and he was glad that I had talked to those men that way.”

Q: “The Mouse that Roared” in 1959 and “Dr. Strangelove” in 1964 are cinematic bookends on the Cuban Missile Crisis. What was the change that happened from one film to the next?

A: “I can tell you exactly what it was. At that time, we lived in a house built at the turn of the century. The foundation was fieldstone and not-so-hot lime mortar, but there was a basement. At the beginning of this, of course my parents were young marries with increasing broods, it was like, ‘what do we do about a bomb shelter down here? Yah, could fill sandbags down here.’ We took the precaution of installing some shelves which were subsequently pulled from storage and kind of having a doomsday plan in place of: having 40 gallons of water and some canned shit and what not. I remember as a kid, talking to my dad, an engineer and a commissioned officer in the reserves, about the reality of this. In the course of an afternoon, as we were shifting supplies, that good man—who had never been in combat, but qualified with weaponry—confessed to me (his son) that he had no desire to shoot someone with a shotgun over a bunch of canned goods. He was staking his claim... we’ll have shelter; we’ll stock up; we’ll do the best we can. But, if this comes to some hellhole where he has to shoot someone over

canned goods, what is the point of living. The thing was that my father has always denied, and I think has taken offense, that he might be confused with some sort of existentialist. And yet, in my very inadequate understanding, I think he was making a very existentialist comment... that he loved his family; that he was prepared to engage in this work party; to figure out the basement as a pantry... he opened his heart in that way. My mother's parents lived 80 miles to the Northeast and they had built their home out of New England rock on this property. My grandfather had to drill by hand, and blast by hand... no John Henry here, man, hand drill, put in the charge, blow out the rock, haul out the rock. Both of them like Nabies, in their forties and fifties, bunking in the cinder block storage shed out in the back. Who knows what carnalities they may have endured during the building of their house. The point being... that the fuel supply had changed. Whereas, my Grandfather had engineered into the house a coalbunker, and a coal stove, which they had used in the early days, by this time they were on fuel oil. He was able to clean out the coalbunker... and they converted it into a root cellar. They painted it white, put in a goddamned, austere bunk, ran a 1.5 volt flashlight bulb into the ceiling with a toggle switch connect to a 12 volt battery on a trickle charge. So, you know, the minute the godless Ruskies were alerted to us on the radio, you retreat to the basement and you've got your light there ready to go. There were cases of olive oil, tomato sauce and past. To me the great thing was, as the Cold War wound down, this larder, which initially had everything short of actual firearms, became more and more of a casual root cellar. 'Oh, here're a couple of cases of tomato paste. Here's some bargain basement olive oil. Oh, here's that cheap beer that Grandpa likes. [Laughing.] Oh, here's two packets toilet paper.' And, the thing is that as Americans, we realized the Cold War wasn't going to come down nuclear, because... we were placating the Commies in Veet-nam⁴; the more we lost in Veet-nam, the less the risk of a nuclear cloud. And there's the thing... there's the thing... would these neo-cons go for some legislation that would put all 60,000 U.S. dead, bas-relief, one-time stamp only, on the quarter dollar. You got your George Washington on the one hand; you got your dead Veet-nam veteran on the other. [Makes stamping action with arm.] Chunga. Chunga. [Laughing.] Come on Mr. Federal Reserve. Come on Mr. Federal Reserve.

¹ Perjorative – A Basque Shepherder

² Coulees are drainage cuts in lava rock used for grazing.

³ Mother's stage name.

⁴ LBJ pronunciation.