

## New Orleans #34

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Fri 8/23/2024 6:01 AM

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#34)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000

December 1980: Tulane's was the first (and last) college graduation I attended. My grant had left me debt free. I would miss my college playmates. The class picture taken in Audubon Park was no substitute. My fellow field placement student Gisele Aresenault and I had collaborated on our end-of-year project (The Self Concepts of Young Adults with Cystic Fibrosis) and presented the results to the pediatric pulmonary team during November's research meeting.

LIFE REGRET # 1: Panicked about being jobless, I didn't allow time between graduating and beginning a new job. Mabel Jackson, Director of the Mental Health Association which housed the Crisis Line, hired me for Project Work as a job readiness training counselor for the mentally ill. I started in November, four weeks before the end of school.

A Federal CETA grant financed the program. I went to bimonthly meetings at the local mental health centers to recruit participants. Robert Thompson and Tony Eccles, a member of my former therapy group, presented candidates when I visited Ponchartrain Mental Health Center. When I had identified enough clients for a class, I scheduled a one-week training. The training consisted of "tips" on job hunting., filling out job applications, discussions about barriers to work and role-playing job interviews. A skittish borderline with tattoos wanted to know if I'd meet him to play tennis. I didn't. Much of my time was empty and tiresome. I unhappily persevered.

Robert Edge, the director of the program, was a shorter, skinnier version of Oprah Winfrey. Her husband Steven "Sledge" Edge was a second year resident at Tulane University Hospital. In addition to supervising me, Roberta attempted job placement and development--with marginal success. Bettie Mebane, the other program employee, was freckled and light-skinned and from one of New Orleans' old-guard Black families. Her fiance, Dr. Patamadai Thiagarajan, practiced medicine at the Flint-Goodrich clinics.

How many pencils could I sharpen? How much coffee could I drink? Until the CETA grant money ran out?

## New Orleans #35

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#35).**  
originally written September 1999 - February 2000

Pleasantly high on mood-altering substances, I enticed Dennis Smith to our bedroom and playfully called out to the living room: "O-o-o-h, David!"

Dennis was the last guest at David's surprise graduation party in May 1981. The usual friends and suspects--Jerry Scavo & Kenny Walker, Pam Bryant, Ann (Potter) & Dennis Daray, Tony Garay, Taylor Gibson, Rosemary & Robert Thompson, Marti Kanin, Nancy Troxel & Julio Jaimes, Gary Plum, Candy Davey--had departed into the muggy evening. From Esplanade, across the courtyard and through our open windows, laughter still sprinkled the midnight air.

David graduated with a B. A. in drama from the University of New Orleans (UNO). Dennis Smith, the fey darling of the theater department, had also graduated with a Master's degree in acting. David (as Rosencrantz) and Dennis (the Danish prince) had appeared in a production of Hamlet that spring. Herb Davis played Claudius. Baritone-voiced Davis, UNO's artist-in-residence and long involved in Black theater in New York City, served as David's sometimes mentor and inspiration. He lived at the corner of Bourbon and Esplanade.

A variety of performances punctuated David's tenure at UNO: in a Jean Genet prison drama he directed, in artist Suzanne Fosberg's The Entire History of Western Civilization in One Act and in a tour to senior citizen groups with The Three Muses. David also directed two short 8mm films; they featured Ann (Potter) Daray and Rosemary Thompson and Gary Plum in gender-switching drag and Richard Brown & Pamela (Sharp) Brown in a conjuring up of the Minotaur.

So what do you do with a drama degree? David continued to work part-time for the Impact (the gay weekly), temporarily as a medical illustrator for the city's health department and auditioned for acting roles. His casting in August 1981 as Brick in Tennessee Williams' Cat on a Hot Tin Roof changed both our lives.

## New Orleans #36

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#36)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000

David came off stage and passed out. "Is there a doctor in the house?" Luckily, there was. Dr. Patamadai Thiagarajan (Dr. T) was attending the play with my co-worker Bettie Mebane from the Mental Health Association.

I hovered in the background in my blue & white seersucker suit, an Episcopal collar chafing my neck. Dr. T's diagnosis: hyperventilation exacerbated by not eating. David blushed sheepishly. Despite ceiling fans and a window air conditioner, the 60-seat storefront theater often reached hotbox status in New Orleans' September weather.

Theatre Marigny (616 Frenchmen Street, four blocks from our apartment) opened in January 1981 as a community (i.e., no pay) theater dedicated to both new and seldom-produced works. Although never openly acknowledging its gay roots, the producers (Sheran Schreiber and Maggie Elder) were a battling Lesbian couple who lived in the rear apartment on site and founding members included several gay men (Don Ezell, Bill Bradford, Tim Lauer, Rusty Ratliff).

As the first presentation of the 1981-82 season, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was a milestone in Theatre Marigny history. The production garnered critical raves, grabbed sold-out attendance and introduced several new company members, including David and myself, who were destined to mold the Theatre's future. The success of the play and Tennessee Williams' New Orleans roots established an ongoing connection to Williams' work.

Helen Jolly (Big Mama) was convincingly fluttery, Tim Lauer (Goober) self-serving and Barbara Moran (Sister Woman) whiningly envious, but knock-out performances were delivered by the leads: Maggie Elder (Maggie the Cat), George Kelly (Big Daddy) and David as Brick, the homosexually-repressed, ex-football player son whose abandonment of his marital bed set the heated sexual and money-grasping plot in motion. Ignoring their sexual orientation, Maggie and David sparked and Brick's final confrontation with Big Daddy drove its mendacity-laden, anguished climax over the top, leaving both David and George Kelly sweating and emotionally and physically exhausted.

Added as a "do-you-know-anyone-who-could-play-this-role?" cast member, I delivered Reverend Tooker's six lines at Big Daddy's birthday celebration with naive confidence.

## New Orleans #37

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#37)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000

Heightened stress... The same month I re-appeared on stage in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (eight years since *Hair*), I began my new job at Tulane University Hospital as the social worker assigned to inpatient and clinic services for orthopedics, neurology, neurosurgery, ophthalmology, immunology/allergy, infectious diseases and pediatric hemophilia.

The Social Services Department included Sarah Paillet (psychiatry), Cathy Westphal (pediatrics, also a alumna of Tulane's cystic fibrosis program), Dianne Barth (nephrology), Administrative Assistant Pat Bel and Director Emma Wilhelmina "Willie" Tinkin. Roberta Knopfer (oncology, cardiology, internal medicine, general surgery) was my immediate supervisor; she shared a house in the French Quarter with Joanne Yoder (psychiatry). In the great social work tradition, queerness flourished in a variety of forms: Tinkin (closeted), Barth (a member of the Aman Ra gay carnival krewe) and Knopfer & Yoder, devoted friends. Rosemary Thompson, my only "secure" contact at the hospital, left soon after my hiring and the birth of her son Eric.

I exited from the Mental Health Association's Project Work painlessly in September 1981. The CETA grant termination, effective in December, had been delivered in July.

The hubbub of a teaching hospital buzzes with excitement and frustration: physicians who are better researchers and teachers than practitioners, nervous interns and residents and fellows, clinical nurse specialists, harried staff nurses, administrators with conflicting goals of maintaining the medical center's status and turning a profit at the same time, departments not routinely found in community hospitals (psychiatry, interpreter services, child life), an acute sense of professionalism...brilliance...despair...and conflict—the stuff of soap opera.

Within six months of dogged determination and long hours and sleepless nights, I learned my job and proved myself skilled and responsible. Both of the head nurses on my primary inpatient units trusted me. Most of the doctors knew my name. I was a success.

## New Orleans #38

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#38)**

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"You should be FUCKING ASHAMED!" I stood in the middle of the theater and yelled. Rehearsal stopped. Speechless, director/producer Sheran Schreiber paled. I walked out and slammed the door.

At Touro Infirmary, David lay suspended in traction and in tears. Schreiber had called David earlier that day at the hospital and told him she was replacing him as the male lead in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, Marigny's November production.

When did David's back trouble begin? When he fell off a stepladder at D. H. Holmes while working on a display? Before that? Further damaged when an uninsured drag queen ran into the Toyota at North Rampart and Esplanade? David was driving. Gary Plum smashed into the window and bled from his forehead. How many falls and mishaps contributed?

My anger surprised me. I felt helpless in response to David's distress. He couldn't avoid surgery the following spring. Coupled with his chronic mental stressors, his back instability would eventually qualify David for Social Security Disability--a blessing and a handicap--which provided him with a meager income over the next several years.

My "don't fuck with my man" rage established a cautious respect from Schreiber. It didn't hurt that I'd saved the October production of *The Odd Couple* by stepping up from a poker player role into the co-lead as Felix Unger--with two weeks rehearsal--or that I was already cast in December's play. I'd become valuable to the Theatre's momentum.

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#39)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000

Although Woody Woodson, a macho sports-enthusiast, was a perfect match for the role of Oscar Madison, *The Odd Couple* went mercifully unreviewed. The pacing was sluggish. We got our laughs only about half the time. Did anyone really want to see another production of Neil Simon's play in 1981? The props were a nightmare. At no point did I make an exit or entrance as Felix without carrying something.

"Unconvincing," was the single word review for my acting in *Family Business*, a drama about four squabbling brothers who inherit a toy company. As the evil oldest, I let my father die of a heart attack and blackmailed my youngest brother by threatening to reveal his homosexuality. In July 1982, for the acid comedy *Father's Day*, I delivered witticisms as the bisexual ex-husband of one of the female leads. I wore white flannels and brandished a cigarette holder.

Never more than a hobby, my involvement in theater was fun, distracting and fascinating. What a pleasure to unabashedly emote on stage after a day of tactful professionalism, to be washed over by applause and laughter, to witness pre-production and backstage machinations.

Miserly, vindictive, ill-tempered, unpredictable and sporadically brilliant, producer Sheran Schreiber ruled Theatre Marigny with an iron fist. When she wasn't directing or building sets, she sat in the back row and chain-smoked and watched rehearsals with a mouth twisted in judgment. Her lover Maggie Elder grabbed the best roles and performed with verve, displaying a rawness and sensuality which matched well with Maggie the Cat, the drug addicted lead in *Ex-Miss Copper Queen on a Set of Pills* and as *Lesbians*, both repressed (*The Children's Hour*) and predatory (*No Exit*).

Schreiber's confrontations became legend, prompting the exits of several actors including Rick Raphael, a 22-year-old "rich, little Jewish boy" with whom David & I had sex in his Chartres Street apartment while Prince's "Little Red Corvette" pounded in the background. Those company members who stayed either ignored Schreiber or ego-trumped her.

While I prospered in this environment, David languished at home, first in pain, and then recovering from back surgery. Luckily for both of us, he would re-enter the theater with a talented flourish for the 1982-83 season.

## New Orleans #40

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#40)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000

Taylor Gibson and I bent over, entwined our wrists in a fireman's carry and hoisted David up the courtyard steps to our second floor apartment. What a relief to have David home after his surgery. I had sat for hours in the hospital waiting room until the orthopedist appeared and explained that the "simple" laminectomy and discectomy had been complicated when an instrument broke off in David's spine and a neurosurgeon had to be called in to address the crisis. The recovery was slow and difficult, but David was back on stage in September 1982.

Blazingly pure in his white suit and bleached blonde hair, David's role as the lobotomizing psychiatrist in Suddenly Last Summer brought an unsettlingly calm note to Tennessee Williams' hothouse hysteria of evil, madness and cannibalism. Joan Blum and Maggie Elder, as Sebastian's mother (Violet Venable) and cousin (Catherine Holly), ranted poetically during their monologues.

Entitled Garden District when performed together, Something Unspoken served as the curtain-raiser for Suddenly Last Summer and examined the sadistic dependency between an Uptown matron and her meek companion. Garden District proved successful, like Cat on Hot Tin Roof the previous year, giving Theatre Marigny an opening season splash for what producer/director Sheran Schreiber labeled a Tennessee Williams Festival.

I had accepted Schreiber's offer to assist direct and, thus, had witnessed once more her volatility during rehearsals. Blum, a local theater diva in her own right, simply found her own pacing and batted her eyes at Schreiber's sputterings. Elder dissolved into tears and screamed back. Schreiber's final blow out with Tim Lauer ended their personal and professional relationship and David became the theater's new set designer in November.

Each night when the stage lights came up, there was--magic! Williams' dialogue crackled and purred. The actors disappeared; the characters emerged. Dramatic tension held the audience silent.

## New Orleans #41

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#41)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000

"Why would you put yourself in such jeopardy!" I was furious, unable to direct my anger at the police entrapment, but only at David's decision-making. His tearful call to me at work from central lock-up still recycled in head.

David was arrested in City Park for soliciting a police officer, a felony which would be knocked down to a misdemeanor for a first time offender. After a year of counseling with a sympathetic closeted Lesbian in a court-supervised probation program, his record was expunged. David denied propositioning the under cover policeman, only that he had spoken to him while digging up dirt to repot plants at home, not a wise thing to do in a notorious gay-cruising area in a public park.

My panic in responding to David's telephone call was calmed by Nancy Troxel (still working part-time for criminal lawyers) who got me the name of an attorney and a bail bondsman and by Ann (Potter) Daray who loaned David the money to spring him out of jail--and by our neighbor Bobby Gordon who told me what to do. Bobby was on release from Federal prison for mail fraud.

Bobby had "inherited" the apartment under ours from his widowed mother and lived there with his girlfriend Patty Salmon. Bobby played the numbers, bet on horses and, after a year of workout in the prison gym, maintained his new sleek-musclcd body by exercising in the courtyard in his jockstrap. When Patty was out of town, Bobby sometimes wandered up to our apartment in a stoned rap, oozing fuck-me testosterone, an invitation we wisely never accepted.

"That Sara Lang is something else!" extolled Bobby, enchanted by our other courtyard neighbor. Elderly Mrs. Lang, the retired land surveyor in the front apartment, had lied to the Federal officers when they came to arrest Bobby, denying his residency at our building and, as a result, had won Bobby's devotion. Both David and Bobby, often home during the day, helped Mrs. Lang with odd jobs. Despite Bobby's dim wittedness and Mrs. Lang's meddlesome noseyness, a sense of community prevailed, long before Neighborhood Watch reached the Faubourg Marigny.

## New Orleans #42

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#42)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000

Dressed in a navy-blue interview suit, Mary Strobe arrived at Tulane University Hospital in November 1982 and was hired as the new nephrology social worker. She'd moved from Kentucky where she had worked in home care and had graduated with a social work degree from Louisville, the alma mater of department director Willie Tinkin, but Mary was born and bred in Indiana! Mary & I were Hoosier siblings, rooted in cornfields, soybeans, basketball, backroad beer-swilling and small town small-mindedness--and we'd left it all behind.

Fighting off Catholic upbringing, adult acne and weight gain, Mary forged her new life in New Orleans buoyed by a sense of humor, intelligence, curiosity and risk-taking. David and I took her to her first carnival parade; she drank too much and literally passed out in the gutter. Who could ask for a better friend?

My hospital clients presented challenges. A 55-year-old Southern belle, her husband in a coma, had never written a check in her life. A Black, diabetic, double-amputee became confused at night and "walked" the hospital halls at 2 a.m. on her stumps. A 30-year-old woman with lupus suffered from agoraphobia; we tried desensitization exercises. A scleroderma patient screamed as they chopped away pieces of his gangrenous body. An opera singer's hospital stay stretched to three months, her workmen's compensation back injury from a falling stage curtain exacerbating her hypochondria. Spinal surgery on a college student left him quadriplegic. Tourists fell and fractured hips. The adolescent hemophiliacs insisted on playing football.

At the end of the day, I returned to the office I shared with Mary Strobe and Ofelia Granadillo (a Cuban refugee who covered cardiology) and Susan Sicotte (the perinatal social worker). We shared one large room which opened off the outpatient psychiatry waiting area. We sometimes howled with laughter. The macabre blackness of it all, coupled with the often outrageous conflicts with doctors and nurses, sometimes sent us over the edge. The psychiatry clinic receptionist appeared in our doorway, scowled and closed door.

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#43)**  
originally written September 1999 - February 2000

In November 1982, I got my first good acting reviews for Tennessee Williams' *Period of Adjustment*, a comedy about two unhappily married couples. As George Haverstick, a shell-shocked Korean War vet with tremors and an unconsummated marriage, I buzz cut my hair, wore boots and strutted across the stage. "But the biggest surprise of the evening is Richard Chaney, whose past performances never prepared us for the comic flair he shows here."

GEORGE: I put THEM in CAT-e-gor-ies: Those that worship it, those that LOVE it, those that just like it, those that DON'T like it, those that just tolerate it, those that DON'T tolerate it, those that just can't stand it and, finally, those that not only can't stand it, but want to CUT IT OFF YOU. And I have married into that last CAT-e-gory. What scares me, is that Isabel has had hospital training and is probably able to do a pretty good cuttin' job.

Jim Bourgeois, properly straight and sober appearing--(he was an accountant at city Hall and an ex-member of my defunct gay men's therapy group)--played Ralph, George's war buddy. Starr Bagley played Isabel, George's wife. Wanda Jones, Black and round and even-tempered (and dramatically trained at Stella Adler's Studio in New York City), directed.

Theatre Marigny became an integral part of our lives. When I came home from work, I automatically went to 616 Frenchmen Street where I met David and rehearsed or painted or stage managed. In January 1983, David designed an impressive set for *Summer and Smoke* and, for the third time, appeared as the male lead opposite Maggie Elder. Every performance night when I tried to rotate the upstage flats, to change the "seasons" in the dark between scenes, I cursed David's construction.

In May 1983, I got my first chance to direct, two one-act dramas by Tennessee Williams which I cast color blind. Darren Isabelle & Mary Fleure were rail-walking children in *This Property Is Condemned* and David & Wanda Jones were frightened, disenchanted lovers in *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow*. My new Tulane University Hospital co-worker Mary Strobe was my assistant director. David directed *Auto-da-Fe*. When George Kelly couldn't appear in the fourth scheduled one-act, Maggie Elder directed my original script *Idiot-Savant*, my first to be produced on stage. The evening was entitled *Tenn x 3 + 1*.

## New Orleans #44

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#44)**

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GRID (Gay-Related Immuno-Deficiency): I don't remember that label. Nor the 1982 article which reported the puzzling new incidence of cancer in homosexual males in New York City and San Francisco. AIDS: gay men, IV drug abusers, Haitians.

I pulled on yellow protective shoe-covers, gown, cap and tied a mask over my nose and mouth. Did I wear goggles? There was no test for HIV. No one knew the danger. Was it airborne? The first patient at Tulane University Hospital was in a private room on the fifth floor with pneumocystis pneumonia. Without effective treatment, he died two days after I met him. A second man died in the ICU. But there was no immediate "epidemic" in New Orleans.

I didn't get involved with AIDS clients because I was gay. I wasn't politicized--yet--around HIV. I got involved because I was the social worker assigned to infectious diseases and those physician specialists were admitting patients to the hospital which, as consultants, they never did. Soon the immunologists-allergists (another specialty assignment of mine) also began to admit AIDS patients. Once I was identified as the AIDS social worker, the oncologists called me to see their Kaposi's sarcoma patients, as well. Nursing education asked me to give the "death & dying" lecture at the chemotherapy training seminars. I read everything I could find.

Many of the sexually attractive fell first. Lin and Lee Soldani, identical twins and A-class gays by New Orleans standards, ran with the French Quarter arts crowd. They'd acted in Hair with me in 1973. They were robust Italian: dark, swarthy and hairy. Lin got sick. Lee didn't. I saw them together in the courtyard at Le Petit Theatre. Lin, emaciated and balding, was in a wheelchair. Lee, unchanged in appearance, hovered over with him with a gin and tonic, a dramatic reminder of what had been.

I don't ever remember being panicked about my own vulnerability, only lucky. While I may regret the relative paucity of my sexual exploits, it also reduced my risk. Of course, AIDS changed how we--especially gay men--view the world. Eventually all our gay friends and acquaintances would be labeled in my head: non-infected, infected and dead.

Once I closed the hospital door behind me, I took off my mask and met my clients face-to-face.

## New Orleans #45

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#45)**

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"...I've got cancer, son." My father's voice cracked. He handed the phone to my mother.

"He found the lump on his chest when was on business in Las Vegas," my mother continued. Biopsied. In his lungs, but with an unknown primary site. Chemotherapy. Radiation treatment. "Metastatic adenocarcinoma," repeated my mother. "Not good," confided Robert Knopfer at my questioning. Roberta, my supervisor, worked as the oncology social worker at Tulane University Hospital. I flew to Delaware, Ohio where my family had moved in 1979. After I received the first call in February 1983, I went three times before my father's death in June.

My parents' home in Ohio was middle-class bland, little different from where they had lived in Indiana or California or Missouri or Florida. My sister Pam was substitute teaching. My sister Marsha drove to Ohio State where she was pursuing a teaching degree. My brother worked in the kitchen of a steak house. He'd married and converted to Mormonism.

My father was sicker on my second visit. He wasn't working any longer. Neither was the chemotherapy. He slept. He moved slowly. He sometimes used his oxygen. When My father's brother Hareld, the lay minister from Indiana, visited, I stood silently for the prayer, resenting my hypocrisy. I didn't pray. I didn't bow my head.

Finally, my father and I were left alone one afternoon. He lay on the couch, a blanket tucked around his chest. I sat on the floor next to him and took his hand. "I love you, Dad."

"I know," he replied, "I love you..." And then my father, with whom I never talked all my life, who never acknowledged the legitimacy of my sexual orientation nor my relationship, my father, who lay pale and thin and covered with malignant lumps, looked into my eyes and asked: "How's David?"

## New Orleans #46

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#46)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000

"No hospital wanted to acknowledge that it treated AIDS patients. This was considered bad for business. Although my AIDS support group had received official approval by the social work department, the hospital made it clear that there would be no publicity in the general community about its existence" ("AIDS, Tuberculosis and Syphilis: A Social Comparison," 12/2/91, Richard Chaney, Howard University).

I propped open the door when someone smoked. The group met in the new office I shared with Mary Strobe, across the psychiatry waiting area from our old office, a space that would accommodate six people who didn't have boundary issues.

I founded the support group in 1983 with Tim Dove and Jerry Stone, two clients with very different lifestyles. Tim was in a two-year "monogamous" relationship, blonde-GQ and closeted. Jerry was scruffy and ear-ringed and be-jeaned and worked as parback, rotating among the French Quarter gay watering holes and multiple partners. Jerry laughed. Tim frowned. They were the perfect match and took to each other immediately.

Confidentiality was the most important group norm, as I reported in a published article ("AIDS: Psychosocial Concerns," Gail Henderson Baumgartner, 1985), "...because of the repercussions...people lose their jobs...They can lose close friends. There's so much paranoia, hysteria and exploitation in the press...(that) there are genuine reasons for concern." Safe sex was also a norm. "We talk about sexual responsibility in the group and what that means and ways (that)...sexual satisfaction can be reached without endangering your partner or yourself" (p. 59).

Neither Tim nor Jerry survived my long term involvement with the group (1983-86). Tim died at Tulane University Hospital in 1984, his eyes frantic above his oxygen venti-mask, his mother and lover arguing outside the ICU. Jerry died enroute to Chicago in a private plane, chartered by his labor union executive father to bring him home to an Illinois hospice. Both of their names grace squares in the National AIDS Quilt.

Death surrounded me. As group members and hospitalized patients died, I became deeply aware of my professional isolation "even though I have some support from my office mate" (Baumgartner, 1985, p. 61). I sought out the consultation of two gay psychiatry residents (Dr. Larry Dumont and Dr. Hugh ~~Floyd~~), became involved with the city's budding AIDS organizations and would eventually ask a gay social worker at Charity Hospital (Gerry Gilliam) to co-lead the group with me in 1985.

Young

## New Orleans #47

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#47)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000

June 9, 1983--all over. My father died, age 57, in the small community hospital where he had been admitted 48 hours earlier, my mother and my siblings and me at his bedside, exhausted, waiting as his breaths grew shallower and the time between them longer--until he exhaled one last time and stopped. I held on to his still warmth and stroked his hand. My mother kissed him.

I almost wrote: "Our journey was ended"--but that's not true. I've often spoken of my father since then, describing his "good death" when I've given lectures, facilitated bereavement groups or met with families of terminally ill patients. He stopped treatment, planned for the aftermath as best he could and said his goodbyes. His picture still sits in our bedroom. David bought the frame. Sometimes, when in distress, I speak to him.

WHAT I WISH I COULD FORGET. The funerals. Two of them. One in Ohio, where black-suited Mormons from my brother's church appeared in a group. The second in Indiana, where family and friends filed by the open casket. I called and arranged for the pallbearers. My brother spoke without embarrassment. My father was buried in the same cemetery as my maternal grandparents, in the middle of cornfields, gravel roads criss-crossing nearby, a shared tombstone bearing his name, a blank space left for my mother who bought four additional plots, one for each child.

When I returned to New Orleans to appear as the Cockaloonny Bird in Tennessee Williams' *The Gnadiges Fraulein*, I took great pleasure in shrieking at the audience.

WHAT I WILL NEVER FORGET. My brother and I carefully rolled my father onto his side. It was the day before he died. The morphine had not yet taken full effect and my father kept pulling off his oxygen. He was sometimes agitated and confused. "I've pissed myself, Jane," he whispered to my mother. The nurse was too busy to come. I looked up at my brother who nodded. "We'll change him."

After my mother left the room, our linked hands, mine and my brother's, moved across our father's body. My father had wet through the pad and sheet. We carefully shifted him, his body light, paper-thin, bones stretching against his skin, pale and dry. He moaned slightly. We touched his so gently, so carefully. We cleaned him and changed the bedding. How did we know how to work with such care, with such efficiency, in such unison, with such love? How could I ever forget?

## New Orleans #48

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Tue 8/27/2024 6:14 AM

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#48)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000of b

THE WRITER: Instinct, it must have been, directed me here to the Vieux Carre of New Orleans, down country--as a river flows--no plan. I couldn't have consciously, deliberately selected a better place than here to discover--to encounter--my true nature.

The Writer in Tennessee Williams' *Vieux Carre*, written in 1977, is transparently Williams himself. The dream-play, set in the French Quarter of the 1930s, follows the activities of boarding house owner Mrs. Wire (Helen Jolly in Theatre Marigny's 1983 production), her maid Nursie (Wanda Jones) and her roomers: Nightingale (Rusty Ratliff), a dying, tubercular street artist; Jane (Maggie Elder), a New Yorker, looking for love; and two impoverished genteel ladies (Angela Hagan & Miriam Barbrie)--as described through the eyes of a new roomer, the Writer (me). Sheran Schreiber directed and David designed a dark, brooding shadow-set to match the play's mood.

In muted spotlight, I opened with a monologue ("Once this house was alive...") and closed ("...empty now...") each performance. *Vieux Carre* is violent and sexually graphic. Nightingale lusts after The Writer and Jane takes up with Tye, a Bourbon Street barker (Mike Day) who ill treats her and cock teases everyone else.

TYE: Once I passed out on Bourbon Street--late night--in a dark doorway--woke up--and this guy was takin' liberties with me and I don't go for that stuff. I said to this guy, "Okay, if you want to blow me, you can pay me one hundred dollars--before, not after."

During one performance, the audience was filled with a tour-bus group which chose our production after the Beverly Dinner Playhouse burned down. If they were expecting *The Glass Menagerie*, they were in for an eye-opening surprise. On the backstage stairs to the second level, I waited in the dark, stark naked, to begin Scene 3, during which Nightingale fellates me.. On stage, Jane screamed "Bitch!" at Mrs. Wire and audience members gasped in shock. I took a deep breath for my entrance... After the intermission, we played the second half of the show to a decimated crowd of five.

David's set and I got good reviews. Henry Hood, who played piano-bar at Lafitte's and who had known Tennessee Williams during his youth, praised my evocation of the playwright as "dead accurate". David, who loves *Vieux Carre*, periodically fantasizes about establishing his own theater group and assuming the role of Nightingale during its premiere production.

THE WRITER: I've noticed I do have some troublesome little scruples in my nature that may cause difficulties...in my negotiated--truce with--life. Oh, there's a price for things. That's something I've learned in the *Vieux Carre*.

## New Orleans #49

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#49)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000 (edited)

Soon after the closing of Vieux Carre in early October 1983, David and I left New Orleans for our most memorable road trip together: Atlanta, Charleston, St. Augustine, Orlando, Key West and Sanibel Island, which solidified my positive feelings about the South. The disappointment of bypassing Savannah would be corrected in 1994.

Enchanted by Charleston's old city beauty and the off-season, white sand beach in St. Augustine, our stop in Key West--the only place where we had reservations--still prompts my thoughts of retiring to the "end of the world." We rumbled across bridges that connected the keys and arrived at one of the many gay owned & operated guest houses. Another gay man, traveling with his son, had a cottage next to ours. At night we went to The Monster disco. On our return loop, we found rooms at a waterfront resort on Sanibel Island on Southern Florida's Gulf Coast where dolphins joined David during an afternoon swim.

Ours was a working vacation. I ran lines with David for Theatre Marigny's November production of Tennessee Williams The Rose Tattoo and edited the script for Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean which I had chosen to direct in January.

David scored another acting success with The Rose Tattoo, warmly portraying the ardent Italian-American suitor to Starr Bagley's Serafina. After a shaky opening weekend, Jimmy Dean also proved popular. The play had run briefly on Broadway prior to its filming in 1982 with a cast that included Sandy Dennis, Cher, Karen Black and Kathy Bates as reunited members of the Texas chapter of the James Dean fan club. Maggie Elder, cast as Cissy in the Cher role, terminated her battling relationship with producer Sheran Schreiber at the end of this production. I cast my friend Mary Strobe as rich-bitch Stella May; she charmed each night by her bellowing of "I'm happy, GODDAMMIT!"

David and I established new friendships through the Theatre. Starr Bagley, who'd played opposite both of us, became an intimate of David's, scored him part-time work with Shallett Enterprises and introduced us to Ron Cotten & Ron Williams, an attractive couple and friends of hers to whom we've remained connected ever since. Ron Williams was nicknamed "Rondo" to distinguish between the two Rons. ...And then, of course, there was Mike Day.

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#50)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000s

Mike Day sat on our couch, pleasantly stoned and carefully considering us with his red-rimmed blue eyes. He'd moved to New Orleans in 1978 from Georgia with his wife and worked construction. Although now divorced, I assumed he was straight. Nothing appeared to contradict this. He'd played his Vieux Carre love-hate scenes with Maggie Elder convincingly, talked fondly about the woman he was dating and showed no gay sensibility other than his interest in theater. So, I was surprised--and pleased--when he accepted David's invitation to join us one night.

Approaching 40, Mike was wonderfully beefy, great legs and chest, strong hands & biceps and a round butt. He was sexy and good and genuine. We liked him. Although Mike happily continued his relationship with his girlfriend and we never had sex with him again (in New Orleans), he remained part of lives.

Mike stage managed. Mary Strobe assistant directed. David designed the set. Love When You Least Expect it debuted at Theatre Marigny in March 1984. It took me a year to write it. I was inspired by what surrounded me--death, love and sex--and by Golden Pond (1981), the film about growing old, which starred Henry Fonda and Katharine Hepburn. It was Theatre Marigny's first full-length, original production and received glowing reviews. At my invitation, members of my AIDS support group attended free one Thursday night.

The play is a traditional drawing room comedy-drama. Joseph, retired and in his early sixties, lives alone in a country cottage which previously served as home to his ex-wife Ruth (Debi Dean) and their son Daniel (Charles Hayles) and, later, to Joseph's ex-lover Adam (Rusty Ratliff). Adam, ill and acid-tongued, now lives next door with a new hustler boyfriend (Samuel Pizzo). Maggie (Sheran Schreiber), another neighbor and old friend, raises chickens and still grieves the death of her lover Alice. Joseph's ex-wife and son and his unhappy daughter-in-law (Wanda Lee Dickey) descend upon him in an attempt to dislodge him from the cottage--and install Daniel there so he can complete his great, unfinished history of South American revolutions. Adam and his boyfriend Malcolm, facing eviction because of their recent public sexual shenanigans, are also interested in Joseph's cottage. The plot turns on Joseph's decision.

I cast David in the lead as Joseph. We argued--about my direction and his set design--but this didn't stop him for delivering an honest, nuanced performance of a character modeled after myself: ambivalent, emotionally reticent and frustrating to those who loved him.

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#51)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000

Willie Tinkin reddened slightly when I told her. Her only comment: "I'm proud of you." I got up and left her office, empowered.

As director of the social work department at Tulane University Hospital, I figured Willie needed to know about the threat of my homosexuality being revealed to the public. I'd accepted a position on the Louisiana State Board of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), representing the new Gay & Lesbian Issues Unit. My name and affiliation appeared on the State chapter's stationery.

Members of the Gay & Lesbian Issues Unit included Neil Gordon (from Baton Rouge and the only non-New Orleanian), Liz Simon, Deb Henson, Gerry Gilliam (with whom I would co-lead my AIDS support group in 1985), Adeline Cabibi & her partner Lucille Hartman (my former co-facilitator in 1978-79 for the Battered Women Program's support group), Betty Spencer and Kenneth Mitchell (the man on whom I had a crush when we graduated from Tulane in 1980). We met once a month for appetizers and planning. We help draft NASW's first policy statement on gays and Lesbians. I spoke about AIDS at the annual State conference, a topic with which I had become very familiar—and which remained identified as a gay issue in 1984

Because I was an NASW board member, I received an invitation to meet with Ernest "Dutch" Morial, New Orleans' first Black mayor, who was running for re-election. About ten of us with different professional backgrounds attended a "private" mid-afternoon appearance. Morial was a pit bull, the son of a pharmacist, who had married into the upper echelon of the city's Black elite. He swept into the room, trailing an expensive-suited entourage. He smelled of power and arrogance.

Morial delivered his practiced, political spiel and smilingly answered a couple of benign questions from the liberally-skewed group. I raised my hand: "What does the city plan to do about the AIDS crisis?"

Morial's nostrils flared: "There is no crisis. The Christians in this city plan to do NOTHING. A better question, might be: What are YOU going to do about YOUR people?" The chill as he exited effectively silenced the room.

## New Orleans #52

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#52)**  
originally written September 1999 - February 2000

Gay Men's Health Crisis (New York City) and Shanti Project (San Francisco) were the "star" organizations, their members easily identified by their sense of urgency and confidence. The Second International AIDS Forum was held in New York City in 1984. David and I stayed in cheap-but-expensive hotel, having shuttled and subways from Kennedy Airport. I walked around with my mouth agape, mesmerized by the city. Atop the Empire State Building, a spray of rain covered our faces. Had David really hustled here 15 years earlier?

Except for the Dutch and French accents which peppered the crowd, the Forum participants shared profiles with the emerging AIDS activists in New Orleans: dedicated enthusiasts, flamboyant hedonists, religious zealots, anarchists, crackpot researchers, humorless social service workers and a rag-tag band of entertainers. All were pioneers, some like myself swept into the fray without warning. I had become THE psychosocial expert in New Orleans, lecturing on AIDS at Tulane's School of Social Work, at the V. A. Medical Center, to special interest groups with the National Association of Social Workers and at the recent national conference of Community Mental Health Centers. Jerry Stone, one of the client co-founders of our AIDS support group, attended the last with me. I received several telephone calls at work each week.

Two "warring" AIDS organizations evolved in New Orleans. The New Orleans AIDS Task Force (seeded by Rue Morrison, an architecture graduate student at Tulane) and The Foundation for Health Education New Orleans (FHENO) (headed by John Ognibene, an activist attorney, and Joe Nigliazzo, a clinical nurse specialist at Tulane University Hospital & a New York City transplant). Project Lazarus, a Jesuit-run halfway house in the French Quarter, would later align with N.O. AIDS Task Force.

While in New York City, David and I took the opportunity to go to Broadway (My One and Only with Tommy Tune & Twiggy, Noises Off with Dorothy Loudon) and off-Broadway (Design for Living with Jill Clayburgh, Raul Julia & Frank Langella, Little Shop of Horrors), but it was the off-off-Broadway production of Robert Chesley's Night Sweat--advertised as the first play about AIDS--that lingered in our memories. We would later meet Chesley after we moved to San Francisco. He was a friend of our flatmate Kelly Hill.

Flying home, I read Lesbian playwright Jane Chambers' Last Summer at Bluefish Cove about a woman dying of cancer and began weeping--for my father. David held my hand.

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#53)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000

Our association with Theatre Marigny divided into halves--The Maggie Elder era (1981-84) and The Stacey Arton era (1984-86)--reflecting who producer/director Sheran Schreiber was fucking at the time.

Arton was younger, prettier and more manipulative than Elder and became Schreiber's new lover during the run of A Streetcar Named Desire, directed by George Kelly. Mike Day, who played Stanley Kowalski, left at the end of the production, unable to tolerate Schreiber's ravings. Arton was Mike's earthy wife ("S-T-E-L-L-A!").

If A Streetcar Named Desire was sterile--and it was--it wasn't nearly as wrong-headed as Schreiber's decision to revive Suddenly Last Summer for the 1983-84 season closing. Only David's set design recaptured the magic of the 1982 show. Completely recast, each new actor proved less capable than the original. In a half-successful stunt, David & I took the leads in Something Unspoken, the curtain raiser, changing the genders of the Uptown matron and her secretary to male. One of the gay reviewers dubbed us the "new (Alfred) Lunt and (Lynn) Fontanne of New Orleans theater."

Jane Chamber's play, which had brought me to tears during our return flight from New York City, opened Theatre Marigny's 1984-85 season under my direction. Last Summer at Bluefish Cove saved Marigny's financial ass the propelled Stacey Arton into prima donna status. Eva (Arton), newly divorced, stumbles into a summer Lesbian colony and romance with Lil (Debi Dean) who is dying of cancer. Lil's friends include closeted feminist Kitty (Starr Bagley), her lover (Jeune Pipes, my 1979 replacement at Belle Chasse State School, still enjoying life in the French Quarter), a stable couple and an older, wealthy woman with her trophy girlfriend Donna .

My friend and co-worker Mary Strobe made her final stage appearance in Last Summer at Bluefish Cove as Annie, Lil's sculptor "best buddy". She got her biggest laugh each night when she cut through Kitty's academic explanation and matter-of-factly labeled money-grasping Donna as "a cunt!"

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#54)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000

Nineteen eighty-four marked the apogee of a happiness arc. I was 35. Have you had those? Periods of time, maybe only realized in retrospect, when variables converge in self-satisfaction. For me, those factors include intense productivity, creativity, professional success, sexual titillation, love...sometimes even joy. Not an easy achievement. This has happened three times in my life: in 1968-70, 1983-85, and again in 1993-95. Pretty damn lucky, I think. Dare I hope for more?

By 1984, I was establishing a professional persona, enjoying fleeting moments of recognition via my AIDS and theater work, luxuriating in the dozen years of my relationship with David and coasting on a sexual high. I felt cocky and secure and snug in my life, despite the crises around me. New Orleans was going bust and several of our friends were floundering.

The 1984 World's Exposition in New Orleans proved to be a financial disaster. The oil market was crashing. Crime accelerated. Canal Street businesses closed. The city's water pumping system slowly failed and when downtown flooded, paddling rats clung to the floating trash.

Fed up with his life and the mood of the city, our friend Taylor Gibson moved to San Francisco. After the birth of their second child, Robert & Rosemary Thompson moved to Long Beach, California. Ann (Potter) & Dennis Daray sold their Uptown mansion and moved to a smaller house in Old Metairie where David and I spent many evenings playing Ming and Scrabble, eating pot stickers and filling the room with cigarette smoke and laughter. Nancy Troxel married her Argentine boyfriend Julio Jaimes and then divorced him. Our friend Gary Plum was hospitalized at Tulane University Hospital and diagnosed with AIDS.

Twenty years earlier, in 1964 at the Noblesville Public Library, I'd found a novel in the stacks--a badly written novel--about folks living in the French Quarter, their lives entangled. I often remember that book, even if I can never remember the title. What a surprise to live the life...

## New Orleans #55

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#55)**  
originally written September 1999 - February 2000

Ron "Rondo" Williams was delectable. He was about six feet tall, 29-years-old, muscled from jogging, auburn hair in loose curls, green eyes with thick lashes and a shaggy mustache. The twinkle in his eyes was mixture of naivete and wicked promise.

When he broke up with Ron Cotten, Rondo moved into a hovel of an apartment on Decatur Street which he also used as a studio for his work as a sign painter and as a cartoonist for the Impact weekly. As friends of Starr Bagley, Rondo & Ron had been frequent attendees at Theatre Marigny and soon Rondo was helping there with poster design and set painting. Rondo had lots of sex, usually making his contacts after a period of brooding in a bar, but he hesitated when David and I suggested that he join us. "Really? With BOTH of you?" ...And the answer was "yes".

I met Rondo for early morning coffee and pastries several Saturdays at Croissant d' Or on Ursulines. I was infatuated and developing a growing fantasy of absorbing a third partner into our relationship. Ultimately, however, it would be Rondo's ex-lover Ron Cotten and Ron's new lover Robert Page who would play more significant roles in our lives as our friends.

Ron's breakup with Rondo had left him single for only a breath of time. Robert proved a better match. Their relationship lasted until Robert's death in 1994. Both Ron and Robert were divorced with children. Both were tall and good looking. We made an attractive foursome on the streets of the Quarter.

We went to movies together, walked the flea market, played Hearts and Risk at Ron & Robert's apartment and spent one memorable afternoon on Ship Island. I love the ocean, walking beside the water, the crash of the waves, rocky coves, but I've always been bored by sunning on the beach. As a result, my excursions with David to the Gulf Coast were rare. He would often go without me to Waveland or Pass Christian. I was agreeable to going to Dauphin Island, southwest of Mobile, about a two hour drive from New Orleans, reached by a pontoon bridge (Inevitably closed during hurricane alerts) which boasted dunes and surf.

Ship Island had dunes and surf, too, and was even more inaccessible than Dauphin Island, reached only by private launch. After Ron & Robert & David & I arrived, we retreated to a deserted part of the beach where we stripped and ran into the waves. Wet and stoned and content and sexually charged, we enjoyed a pleasant afternoon, pleasurable enough that I could discount my swollen, sunburned feet as a reasonable trade-off. Back home, David & I kissed without touching, our arms spread apart, my skin hot and tight.

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#55)**  
originally written September 1999 - February 2000

Theatre Marigny... When I threatened to flee, Lisa Carballo slapped me repeatedly in the face until I began to cry and fell to my knees. Lisa and David and I comprised a trio for one of the intermingled plots that made up *The Shadow Box*, the 1977 Pulitzer Prize winning drama about death and dying. Lisa played the ex-wife of David (dying) and I was his lover, unsuccessfully coping. My tears came easily. We were good.

At the beginning of the year, David and I had survived a torturous production of *The Boys in the Band*, a revival of the gay confessional-party play which had shocked off-Broadway in the 1960s and enraged gay libbers by the end of the 1970s. Rusty Ratliff, a nurse at the V. A. Medical Center and an original Theatre Marigny company member, convinced Sheran Schreiber to produce it so he could take the lead. Our friend Ron "Rondo" Williams was well cast as the best friend and Charles Hines, the hustler with whom David & I first had a three-way, grabbed the token Black role. David played Harold, the venom-tongued queen who pricks all the pricks in Act Two and I was Hank, the butch (!) basketball coach. Two actors, including Hines, and the director left during rehearsals. Ratliff started shooting speed and drinking again. Schreiber fumed not so silently from the wings.

...But it was Stacey Arton's ascendant star that hurried our exit from the company. *Agnes of God* (in which she played a nun suspected of murdering her new born baby) and *Extremities* (as a threatened rape victim who captures and tortures her abuser) showcased Arton's undeniable talent. With Arton now center stage, everyone else was eclipsed. In Schreiber's paranoia, we were all enemies or potential enemies of Arton, to be dealt with harshly if we upset her. Seasoned performers (Starr Bagley, Debi Dean) vowed never to work at the Theatre again.

Although I endured until January 1986, David designed his last set in July 1985. His blow-up with Schreiber was prompted by his intolerance of her ill-treatment of others, no doubt exacerbated by a similar history with his mother. Warren Sampson, Jr., John Engler and Daryl Cade replaced David and me as Theatre Marigny's alpha males. David chanted, using recent skills acquired from Starr Bagley's Buddhist community.

## New Orleans #57

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#57)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000

In February 1985, after three and a half years, I changed specialties at Tulane University Hospital and became the new pediatric nephrology social worker, working with children on dialysis and receiving kidney transplants. This would later make me an attractive applicant when I got jobs at Children's Hospital in San Francisco and at Pacific Presbyterian Medical Center in organ transplantation, but an immediate result was my moving my HIV support group out of the hospital and into our apartment for every other Saturday meetings. I arose early each group morning and dutifully set up folding chairs in a circle to supplement the usual seating in our living room. Charity Hospital social worker Gerry Gilliam joined me as a co-leader.

Meanwhile, Jonathan Clemmer, an ICU nurse at Tulane, energized the N. O. AIDS Task Force with his intense drive and focus. It didn't hurt that he was young and clean-cut and well-spoken. The N. O. AIDS Task Force grabbed money from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and opened a one-room office in a donated space on Bourbon Street in the Quarter. Volunteers distributed condoms and literature and, when a telephone counseling line and a buddy system were established, I volunteered as a trainer, using much of what I'd learned from The Crisis Line and the Battered Women's Program and my two years with the support group.

David also volunteered with N. O. AIDS Task Force. His first buddy match was with a Black Vietnam veteran whom he visited weekly at the V. A. Medical Center where he was hospitalized. After the second round of trainings, David assumed a volunteer position as one of the managers of the Bourbon Street office. Other volunteers included an Uptown female Baptist minister and her husband. Primarily, however, the volunteer force was comprised of gay men, just as Mayor Morial had admonished me in 1984, "to take care of your own." Our friend Ron "Rondo" Williams provided design and graphic services gratis and began a sex-charged relationship with Chuck Nearn, another office manager volunteer.

Chuck was a leather queen chef who'd recently arrived in New Orleans from the New York City-Key West-San Francisco circuit. He was dark and hairy and histrionic. During the third volunteer training weekend, Chuck burst into tears and ran from the church basement into the street where he hyperventilated. His HIV test had come back positive. He wasn't the only one. Karen Wulff,, the hematology-oncology nurse coordinator at Tulane Hospital with whom I'd worked in the hemophilia clinic, closed the door to her office and told me that 70% of the hemophilia population was testing positive as well.

The circles were widening. The epidemic was in full swing.

## New Orleans #58

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#58)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000

Conclusion of a speech I delivered May 10, 1985 at an AIDS symposium organized by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases:

"What do I remember? I remember Walter coming to a group meeting and telling me that other than his visits to the doctor and the hospital, this was the only time he had left his house in six months. I remember Jerry hauling his swollen body up the stairs and asking for pillows to to make himself comfortable as he joked about his appearance. I remember Rick calling me excitedly about each new cure he read about in the newspaper or saw on television, only to call back disillusioned later and admit, even if they did find something, 'it's not going to help me, is it?' It's too late for me, isn't it".

"I remember Rob tearing up his apartment in a blind rage and sitting on the porch steps in the cold. I remember Tim's eyes in the intensive care unit after he had been intubated, clutching my hand in fear and anger. I remember Elise tearfully telling me that she would not be able to have another relationship because nothing would come of it. I remember Tom explaining how he had left California to escape AIDS, only to be diagnosed in Baton Rouge. I remember Ed sitting quietly in his apartment with me filling out disability forms and talking about his will. I remember Charlie's books, Toby's vitamins, Joe's exercise program and Bob's humor."

"I remember me. Me being mad, scared, sad and glad. Mad at a physician devoid of feeling when he told Kevin his diagnosis. Scared when I found a purple spot on my arm one morning when I woke up, only to have it disappear. Sad at Rob's funeral when I cried with his parents and his lover. Glad when I had an opportunity to speak to people about AIDS and saw interested and concerned faces."

"One of my favorite quotes is a question posed by the writer Anais Nin: 'Why search for the fire, why not be the fire?' I believe each of us can be the fire--that we can break through the darkness, ignorance, sorrow and prejudice of the AIDS crisis."

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#59)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000

Perry Brass sent us a check for \$100 as a housewarming gift when we moved last year. Despite such generosity, I've always found Perry difficult, if often amusing. His ego is bigger than mine, but his self-confidence has paid off. With financial support from his partner Hugh Young (one of the Tulane Hospital psychiatrists who acted as a consultant to my AIDS support group in 1984), Perry has persisted in his writing career over the last 16 years with admirable results: collections of poetry, magazine short stories, erotica, science fiction/fantasy novels and a guide book for the middle-aged: *How To Survive Your Own Gay Life* (1999). Whenever I talk to someone with literary aspirations, I always quote Perry's philosophy: Get up EVERY day and WRITE SOMETHING. This is exactly why I will always be a dilettante.

When we first met Perry and Hugh, they lived in a two-storey Quarter rental with their toy poodles. Hugh was short and bearded and prematurely balding. He collected violoncellos. Perry was curly-haired and slender and talkative. A play he had submitted to New Orleans Contemporary Arts Center, *Night Chills*, was given a staged reading in 1984 and Perry asked me to take the lead as AIDS widower in conflict with his dead partner's mother. I did with so-so success. *Night Chills* later went on to win the 1985 Jane Chambers Playwriting Contest in New York City. , Chambers, dead from breast cancer, was the author of *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, which I had directed at Theatre Marigny.

With his usual tenacity, Perry sold a package deal to Theatre Marigny and the Foundation for Health Education New Orleans (FHENO) to stage his three one-acts (*Here, There and Yonder*) as an AIDS fundraiser in May 1985. Perry "cast" me to direct, Ron "Rondo" Williams as his alter ego and his current boyfriend-on-the-side Lee Prevost as the lead in the final segment. The plays performed on dark Sundays during the run of *The Shadow Box*. *Here, There and Yonder* detailed the gay-sex adventures of its confused protagonist (like Perry, Savannah born) with a suicidal New York City businessman, a drunken New Orleans reveler and a jealous Key West waiter. My main satisfaction was keeping Rondo on stage in the least amount of clothes possible.

Perry is one of our few acquaintances who has visited us in all three of our homes--in San Francisco, Washington DC and Seattle--usually linking his stays with bookstore readings. Ironically, after many Gulf Coast beach afternoons with David during the 1980s, it wasn't until 1995 that Perry made his first sexual pass, but too late.

## New Orleans #60

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#60)**  
originally written September 1999 - February 2000

The world is a very small place--maybe even smaller if you're a gay white male living in the South. Theatre Marigny's new artistic director Warren Sampson, Jr. chose the play Warren for his local directing debut. Playwright Rebecca Ranson lived in Atlanta. Ranson was a friend of our friend Taylor Gibson. Warren was one of the first AIDS poster boys, his picture appearing in the 1983 edition of TIME magazine. He died in 1984 in San Francisco. Warren and Taylor and Rebecca all knew each other from their art roots in Tennessee.

Sampson cast his lover John Engler as Warren, Stacey Arton as Rebecca and Rondo and me as Warren's friends Kelly and Sam. I borrowed leather gear from Chuck Nearn for Sam's role. Taylor flew in from San Francisco for the November 1985 opening and joined David in the audience. Warren was one in a string of AIDS-themed plays, some successful (Night Sweat, Night Chills), others very successful in what would become a tradition of pain and hope: As Is, Angels in America, Rent. Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart was the most angrily strident.

I survived two days of auditions for the Contemporary Arts Center production of The Normal Heart as Mickey, the aging gay activist (I was 36), a plum supporting role. The director and producer ran Mickey's breakdown scene over and over again, pairing me with different actors, until I was exhausted. A day later, I got a call letting me know the proposed production was cancelled. Ten years later in Washington DC when I saw a friend perform the role, I was rightfully envious.

MICKEY: They're going to persecute us! Cancel our health insurance. Test our blood to see if we're pure. Lock us up. Stone us in the street. And you think I'm killing people? Yes, you do! I know you do! I've spent 15 years of my life fighting for our right to be free and make love whenever, wherever... And you're telling me that all those years of what being gay stood for is wrong...and I'm a murderer!

## New Orleans #61

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#61)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000

By the end of 1985, ties severed with Theatre Marigny, working only sporadically and without satisfaction, David increasingly voiced his desire to leave New Orleans. His unhappiness found a willing partner in my own restlessness. I'd met my challenges and won. What had once been exciting seemed routine and familiar. Mardi Gras was a parking inconvenience. No longer anonymous, we ran into people who knew us whenever we walked the Quarter.

I harbored a nagging fear that if we didn't leave we'd be comfortably stuck in the Mississippi mud forever, a fear reinforced by local superstition. If the world was bigger than Indiana, then it was bigger than New Orleans, too. Hadn't I inherited my sense of adventure from my parents?

David wanted to move to San Francisco and I can't remember any other place we seriously considered. New York City? Boston? In addition to its allure as a gay mecca, the San Francisco Bay Area was home to Elisa Baker, a high school classmate of mine, Tom McGuire, my former high school student and the new residence of our friend Taylor Gibson. Taylor's friend Kelly Hill—the real-life character Rondo had played in Theatre Marigny's Warren—was a founding member of San Francisco's Theatre Rhinoceros

Ready to shed responsibility for the HIV support group I'd begun, David and I attended a December holiday-and-farewell party at co-leader Gerry Gilliam's house in the Irish Channel. The guests included the support group members and their partners and friends. David appeared stunned. When we returned home, he sheepishly told me why. Gerry's house was familiar.

David, suffering from multiple medical problems, had consulted our physician Dr. Wiley Jenkins routinely over the years. One day after an 11:30 a.m. appointment, Wiley's suggestion that David join him for lunch ended up with a stop at Gerry Gilliam's vacant house and an afternoon of unbridled sex. Married, ostensibly heterosexual, sophisticated and ruggedly handsome, Wiley turned out to be a passionate lover. David repeated the tryst.

Did Wiley fuck other men? Why else would he have a key to Gerry's house? He was more of a Quarterite than we suspected. Was I jealous? David's recounting excited me. Why couldn't I have been there? "Now, start at the beginning of the story again...and don't leave anything out..."

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#62)**

originally written September 1999 - February 2000

My last two theater experiences in New Orleans couldn't have been more different, one dreadful (The Killing of Sister George), the other exhilarating (Charles' Face, John).

I stacked the cards against myself when I made several ill-conceived director's decisions for The Killing of Sister George, including choosing it for production. The 1966 British import creaked, its past success due mainly to its shock value in depicting an S&M relationship between a lovable soap-opera star (parish nurse Sister George) and her young, frilly lover (Childie). But I was driven by my previous Lesbian hit (Last Summer at Bluefish Cove) and my thought that Theatre Marigny producer Sheran Schreiber would be perfect as Sister George. I forgot Schreiber was a sloppy, unpredictable actress and had trouble remembering lines.

And then out of spite and rebellion, I miscast the role of Childie. Marigny's supernova Stacy Arton, although younger than the character, could probably have carried it off. Instead I picked a bleached blonde "bimbo" through open auditions who looked the part but whose irritating lisp proved distracting. She arrived each rehearsal with her partner as bodyguard, depressingly enthusiastic. No one came to see the play. Performances were cancelled. And the one review was negative, lamenting what I believed to be my only good decision, casting Wanda Jones as the Gypsy neighbor: "And WHY has Chaney chosen a Black actress for this part?"

So in January 1986, I walked away from Theatre Marigny with little fanfare, no real regrets, many good memories and a long postponed sense of relief. Although David designed sets for the Contemporary Arts Center's production of Dario Fo's Diary of an Anarchist and for the Free Southern Theatre's A Soldier's Play, our theater involvement outside of Theatre Marigny was infrequent.

Writer/artist/director/producer Charles Kerbs provided us with our last hurrah. Kerbs, the co-founder of Apple Street Playhouse, asked David and me to appear in a staged reading at Loyola University of excerpts from Don Quixote and then--pleased with our collaboration--gave us Charles' Face, John as our New Orleans exit piece.

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#63)**  
originally written September 1999 - February 2000

Charles Kerbs was a transplanted New Yorker, a playwright who had sharpened his teeth in the 1960s at Cafe Cino in Greenwich Village with Robert Patrick (Kennedy's Children). Kerbs asked David to direct the one act which he'd written and to cast Rondo (Ron Williams) and me. Charles' Face, John was a two character play previously published in Drummer magazine. A voyeur is violently seduced by a neighbor he's been watching. The action ends with the voyeur pinned to a couch, his hands tied behind him, as the neighbor begins to strip him. Rondo was the voyeur and I was the retaliating neighbor.

Kerbs' play was presented at a gay bar on North Rampart Street for three weekends, followed by the nightly drag show which routinely occupied the space. I borrowed part of my costume from Chuck Nearn who was into denim and leather. Rondo dressed in a t-shirt and khaki shorts. I wore a loose tank top and Chuck's ragged 501s. A tear in the jeans started at the ass, traveled between the legs and vented part of the crotch. I wore a jockstrap underneath.

We rehearsed at our apartment. The blocking and script called for me to tease Rondo. As his character struggled with his ambivalence about making sexual contact, I grew bolder.

The stage at the bar was elevated four feet above the tables and chairs. The lights were close and hot and white. The backstage consisted of a five foot square waiting area behind a screen and a narrow dressing room filled with dresses, boas, tiaras, mirrors and makeup. Two tiny fans, clipped to shelves which held hats and wigs, stirred the perfumed air.

Rondo and I did six performances. Each crackled with sexual tension. In addition to the usual bar goers, the audience consisted of several of our friends and acquaintances, many of whom were involved with the New Orleans AIDS Task Force. Charles Kerbs' friend Robert Patrick flew in from New York City. Watching seduction on stage took safe sex to its ultimate conclusion: an exercise in mental masturbation, a mind fuck for the 1980s.

## New Orleans #64

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#64)**  
originally written September 1999 - February 2000

I returned to St. Marks Community Center for my test results and post-test counseling. St. Marks was a worn-out building in the Quarter with linoleum and concrete echoes. It rattled and screeched with folding chairs.

I'd had my blood drawn for the HIV test the previous week. My counselor, the perky male partner of a Tulane physician (who I had trained for this role), motioned me over to his screened desk and asked me for my anonymous identification number. He thumbed through the box and pulled out my card.

My decision to get tested had not been an easy one. For several years, the norm in the gay community was NOT to get tested. For what purpose? There was no good treatment. And if the test came back positive, with what repercussions? What was my risk? Could I have exposed myself in the hospital? Should I have taken off my protective mask? Did I clean the drinking glasses thoroughly after the support group meetings at our apartment? David and I had used condoms with Mike Day and Rondo, but not with Charles Hines or Rick Raphael a couple of years before that. Did David rubber up with Wiley Jenkins? Hadn't I gone bareback with Bill Ford in 1978?

Our planned move to San Francisco—where I thought a future job consideration might require knowledge of my HIV status—prompted my testing. I didn't want to be surprised. Otherwise, I'd acquired a certain amount of fatalism about AIDS. If I was positive, so be it. AIDS no longer seemed frightening to me, death not so horrible, even at 37. Our new roommate in San Francisco, Taylor's friend Kelly Hill, was HIV+.

"Negative," announced my smiling counselor at St. Mark's. David, too. We wouldn't get tested again until 1993 in Washington DC when our new boyfriend Ron Smith requested it. Ron worked for the Federal government in the administration of the Ryan White funds.

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#65**

WRITER: "They're disappearing. Going. People you've known in places do that. They go when you go. The earth seems to swallow them up, the walls absorb them like moisture, remain with you only as ghosts. Their voices are echoes, fading but remembered" (Vieux Carre (1977), Tennessee Williams).

Leaving New Orleans would establish our pattern: no move without thoughtful consideration and ample planning, no rash decisions. David on ahead to find and "open up" a new place, me behind to "close up" the old. My retirement money from Tulane Hospital financed our departure.

David exited three weeks before me, driving the Toyota. He would stay with Taylor Gibson and apartment hunt with our roommate-to-be Kelly Hill. My unsolicited resume mailing to the Greater Bay Area--partly to temper my mother's naysaying--brought the half-promise of an AIDS position at Children's Hospital San Francisco.

During my last week of work, I came home to find our balcony door ajar, the apartment burglarized and only a jar of pennies stolen. I slept restlessly. My friend and co-worker Mary Strobe made sure I got the mahjongg set I wanted as a gift when I left the hospital. David telephoned. He and Taylor were arguing. David telephoned. He and Kelly had secured an apartment. I telephoned. Rondo was going to travel with me and visit his sister at San Francisco's Treasure Island.

Memorial Day weekend 1986: I picked up the U-Haul truck and began to pack. Ron Cotten and Robert Page helped. Rondo and his new boyfriend Wallace Merritt helped. Mike Day appeared at twilight, hurrying with me to load the last before the disconnected electricity plunged our apartment into dusky blackness. I drove to Ann (Potter) Daray's to spend the night.

Before I picked up Rondo, in the final snapshot taken of me in New Orleans, I sit in the back of the opened U-Haul with four-year-old Elizabeth Ann Daray in my lap, the early morning sun on our faces. Thirteen years of David's and my possessions jumble behind me. Soon I would be on the road again...and gone.

## New Orleans #66

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**MY NEW ORLEANS AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1973-86) by RICHARD CHANEY (#66, The End)**  
originally written September 1999 - February 2000

"It had been his residence during a golden time, for over a decade...an inextricable part of his life. It was never to stop being a part of him" (Gore Vidal: A Biography [1999], Fred Kaplan, p. 622).

When do we become mature? Does our realization make it so? I arrived in New Orleans a youth (age 24), departed as an adult (37). I took my life with me.

DAVID: "I'll make you leave me," threatened David in 1978 in the heat of battle, after swearing his commitment to our relationship, but questioning mine. Would he ever stop fearing abandonment? Would he ever trust me? "I will be with you forever," I repeated. We accommodated. We compromised. We endured. Our shared work together in theater and with the New Orleans AIDS Task Force provided productive connections. Sex was satisfying and unpredictable. We loved. We survived.

COMING OUT: Although the process never ends, I reached the apex--out to all my friends, at work, to my parents--without guilt or trauma. I would never be a dedicated political activist. I would be the liberated me. And isn't that the more important step.

FAMILY: By 1986, I'd re-established contact with my mother. My father's death in 1983 brought us closer. My mother and I spoke now on the phone, always politely, sometimes with heartfelt honesty. My family of friends continued to provide me with support, but my blood kin would gradually assume an importance in my life for which I was unprepared, pleasantly surprised and, finally, very grateful.

MY PROFESSIONAL SELF: Two Master's degrees. Six years of volunteer work. Ten years of social work employment. A diverse array of clients. Group facilitation. Team experiences. Lecturing. Advocacy. Chronic exposure to crises and conflict. I knew what I was doing. I could defend myself without anger. I could self-examine without judgement. I could discover without self-doubt. I could enjoy my success.

In San Francisco, I would continue my AIDS work, expand my creative writing, get involved in theater and enjoy lots and lots of hot man-to-man sex. ALL NOT TRUE! Cockiness never keeps its erection very long.

As a young, gay man, the French Quarter supported my identity. I learned to live in an urban center and in a world culturally very different from Indiana. Thirteen years in The City That Care Forgot truly changed my life forever. It was the most marvelous adventure.

*Richard Chaney (b. 1949) is a playwright, director, actor and retired medial social worker. He was born in Indiana where he met his partner David Swisher (1947-2023) in 1971. They moved to New Orleans' French Quarter in 1973 where they were involved in theater, LGBT activism and early work in HIV services. They subsequently lived in San Francisco (1986-90), Washington DC (1990-96), Seattle (1996-2003), Tucson (2003-13) and, finally, Athens, Georgia where Swisher died after a long illness. Swisher and Chaney were together for over 51 years.*

*This is also written in memory of Alan Bourgeois, Perry Brown Jr., Ron Cotten, Dennis Daray, Tim Dove, Jessie Dykes, Tony Eccles, Suzanne Joslyn Fosberg, Taylor Gibson, Julio Jaimes, Wiley Jenkins, Helen Jolly, Marti Kanin, Charles Kerbs, Roberta Knopfer, Sara Lang, Chuck Nearn, Robert Page, Gary Plum, Gay Reeves, Robert Rohe, Bill Rushton, Jerry Scavo, Michael Stark, Jerry Stone, Willie Tinkin, Kenny Walker & Ron "Rondo" Williams.*

9/1/24, Athens, Georgia