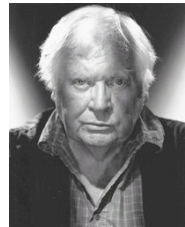


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New York never sleeps and neither do I

Back in New York to direct an off-Broadway play, I am reminded of the Big Apple's dynamism - even when I'm trying to get some rest



by KEN RUSSELL

The last time I stayed in New York, it was in 1984 for the premiere of a movie called *Crimes of Passion*, featuring Kathleen Turner and Anthony Perkins, and I was staying at the very swish Plaza Hotel. My suite overlooked Central

Park, through which I would frequently progress in a carriage and pair, taking in the ruling Park Avenue doyennes, the picnics on boulders under luscious greenery, the serene boat rides on the lake around Bethesda Fountain.

Quite a contrast to my present visit, to direct an off-Broadway play called *Mindgame*. My present accommodation is also off-Broadway (a long way off) in a district that never sleeps called Greenwich Village, the haunt of 24-hour revellers of all nations.

After my usual unwelcome wake-up call at 4:30 a.m. by a phalanx of giant trash collectors, followed by a stolen snooze, I'm ready for a quick shave and shampoo.

On my 15-minute walk to rehearsal down Sullivan Street, I pass florists full of flowers that never fade, fruit that never rots, international newsstands and more open-air cafés than you would find in Montparnasse. Rounding the bend at Prince Street into "Fagin's Park", I encounter happy nomads on park benches breakfasting on waxpapered

sandwich rolls, shouting cheerfully at one another. One hobo glued to a stoop accosts me to admire my sartorial style: "I appreciate those suspenders, man. Thank you for brightening the city."

New York, aka Skyscraper National Park, is a friendly kind of town. Manny the street vendor promises to scavenge 8th Avenue for whatever second-hand articles I might desire. A painter leaves his unwanted canvas on a bench for anyone to take - alas for him, no one does. Hordes of ladies in tight blue jeans, flashy boots and gold-plated gym jackets trot down the sidewalk, their short-legged dogs - usually a matched pair - hugging the ground with their bellies.

A bevy of nannies swap trade secrets about screaming children as they take over the sidewalk, pushing their charges in strollers before them. Traffic rules are approximate, not carved in stone. I'm learning to cross the street like a New Yorker, heart-in-mouth, dodging against the light through gaps in the stream of cars. I drop two heavy bags of dirties in at the same-day laundry. Opposite the SoHo Playhouse, for seven bucks in the Van Dam Diner, I get a slap-up breakfast including two fried eggs over easy, crispy bacon that really is crispy and as much coffee as I can drink.

Then it's over to the 200-seat theatre for a day of rehearsals. I pick up the laundry on the way home. The bill is \$25 - a dollar a pound, everything neatly folded (but not ironed). They don't mind that I never have the ticket handy - people from the 'hood qualify as family.

Back in the apartment, it's a giant cup of Irish tea, a spot of telly and a spate of vicious soundbites from smiling partisan supporters of Obama and Mac, interspersed with bizarre commercials for male sexual enhancement,

including Viagra. ("See your doctor if you have an erection lasting more than four hours.") Upstairs someone is treating us to an unsolicited trombone recital. My wife, in her capacity as assistant director to my moods, suggests a movie.

Outside on Bleecker Street the road is alive with yellow cabs. No need to hail one; you simply have to fend them off.

Armed with a bushel of popcorn and a gallon of Coke between us, we take a lift to the auditorium where the previews are already showing - just. No sound, and the picture is as dim as a Toc-H lamp (as we used to say in the RAF). Elise goes in search of the projection booth - deserted. Back in the auditorium she makes an announcement to the restless patrons: "The manageress sends her apologies but promises everything will be all right in time for the feature." It was! Pity the same couldn't be said for the movie, Appaloosa.

Return to Bleecker Street, where it's "go, man, go!" Jazz clubs, bars, eateries, rock venues, drugstores, sidewalk vintage-jewellery-that-only-looks-good-at-night shops - past midnight and still vying for customers. The absinthe-drinking contest at the local danceteria sounds promising, but we opt instead for a table half in and out of an Italian restaurant, where I have the best lasagna bolognese ever and Elise has a peach "fuzzy-wuzzy" cocktail. The balmy night air is alive with the sound of a city celebrating. Celebrating what? Celebrating that they're New Yorkers, I guess. Kerb-dwellers, bums, punks, tattooed bohemians, extravagant outfits, fur collars indistinguishable from matted hair, people whose guitars knock your kneecaps as you pass them on pavements, people who talk to themselves if no one else is

responding, a T-shirt reading "I just killed a clown" and another, "I'm American - Entertain me". All are ready to meet and greet.

I ask Marshall W. Mason, the Broadway director (and director of *Sleuth* and *The Elephant Man* in London), in town to direct the Pulitzer prize-winning *Talley's Folly* again, what he thinks makes New York special. "Most people in the world have a dream," he says. "But New Yorkers have the guts, drive and pizzazz to make that dream come true."

Even in their walk, New Yorkers move with purpose, vitality. Sailors in uniform dot the pavements like ducks among the panthers - the fleet's in town. They're trading hats, examining the brims with great theatricality. They and everyone else are still partying under my window at 4am on Monday - our day off.

Here the theatres work on Sundays and are dark on Monday. Time for a little shopping for essentials - handkerchiefs, CDs, teapot, bottle opener, sheets, Apple computer accessories. In our cab we pass a New York I've never seen except in films - lower Manhattan - speeding by in hyperkinetic, kaleidoscopic profusion. Art Deco rubs shoulders with Art Nouveau along endless miles of avenues and across a hundred streets of stores, restaurants, and parks; each person a star, restlessly pounding the pavement on his way to immortality. New York is a sensory experience that could last a lifetime. Yes, New York has everything. I could live here for ever and never see the same thing twice.

As Thomas Wolfe said: "One belongs to New York instantly - as much in five minutes as in five years."

